



DENEANE  
CLARK

*Faith*

*Where passion  
meets pleasure.*



DENEANE  
CLARK

*Faith*

*Where passion  
meets pleasure.*

# Faith

**Deneane Clark**

LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

## A Chance Encounter

“Do you think he’s out there somewhere?” All the girls looked out into the shadowed gardens, where dozens of daring couples had already disappeared.

“Well, he has to be somewhere. He’s not in the ballroom anymore.”

Someone opened the doors, allowing the noise of laughter, music, and conversation to escape the ballroom. The girls turned as a group, disappearing first from view, and then from hearing, the sounds of the ball dimming to a dull but welcome roar in the background as the doors shut again behind them.

Above on the balcony, Faith rolled her eyes, again looking out into the garden. She knew, without question, that Roth was the “he” to whom the gaggle referred. Laying one hand on her heart, she reached the other out into the inky blackness. “My lord Gareth,” she said in a voice laced with exaggerated pleading. “If you’re out there, anywhere, please reveal yourself to me so that I can also bask in your noble glow.”

“Actually, Miss Ackerly, I’m a bit closer than you might have thought.”

*For Mama and Daddy, who, no matter how often I have tested it, always had faith in me. Together, you are my inspiration, my foundation, and the reason I will always, always believe in forever.*

*I love you both so much.*

# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[A Chance Encounter](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-five](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)  
[Chapter Thirty](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-one](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-two](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-three](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-four](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-five](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-six](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)  
[Epilogue](#)  
[Praise](#)  
[Other Books By](#)  
[Copyright](#)

# *Prologue*

Summer, 1800

**S**it down and be still, Grace,” admonished Marie Ackerly, exasperation sharpening her typically gentle voice. She took her wriggling seven-year-old daughter’s hand and drew her back to the worn velvet seat of the family coach. “Faith has been quiet and well behaved this entire journey, and she’s not even five years old yet. Certainly if she can manage, so can you.”

Grace, chafing at being confined for even the hour-long drive to visit some of her mother’s relatives, reluctantly settled down. As soon as Marie looked away, however, she stuck out her tongue. Faith stared quietly back. Fortunately for both of them, they were finally arriving at their destination.

The house they were visiting, a large, rambling country home, was just perfect for entertaining young children. It had an attic filled with trunks of unusual, old-fashioned clothes and musty outdated furniture, and a basement that contained boxes and boxes of toys cast off by the five Ackerly children’s older cousins. Outside, in the garden, was a wildly sprawling and overgrown hedge maze.

The two girls’ youngest cousin was a boy named Milton, who was a year younger than Grace and a year older than Faith. The three children, excited to see one another, immediately ran off to play in the attic, trying on clothes and having an imaginary tea presided over by Faith, who, even at such a tender age, was already showing signs of becoming rather prim.

Grace, on the other hand, was quite a tomboy, and the sedate play in the attic was doing nothing to satisfy her sense of adventure. She quickly grew bored and convinced Milton it would be much more fun to play in the basement. Somewhat reluctantly, Faith followed them downstairs.

Milton had only older brothers, who had long since outgrown the things kept in the cellar. He and Grace managed to find treasure after treasure, however, while Faith, who had much preferred playing tea and



dress-up in the attic, began to complain. Grace and Milton largely ignored her, intent on setting up a widespread battlefield with a box of wooden soldiers that had seen much better days. Faith sat on a nearby barrel and pouted at being snubbed until finally, in a rare fit of anger, she hopped off the barrel and stomped right through the scene of carefully erected carnage, kicking over soldiers as she went.

“I do *not* wish to play in the basement any longer,” she stated in the haughty, imperious tone that usually drew looks of amusement from adults.

Grace and Milton both leapt to their feet, but it was Milton who managed to speak first. Remembering all the plots his brothers had devised to keep him from trailing about after them, he winked at Grace over her sister’s blonde head. “What do *you* want to do, Faith?” he asked, his tone solicitous.

Grace’s mouth dropped open. She was just about to hotly protest when she caught her cousin’s warning wink. She tried her hardest to wink back, but couldn’t quite manage it, so she blinked both eyes hard at him and put an arm around her younger sister. “Yes, Faith, what *do* you want to do?”

Faith was surprised at the unexpected show of conciliation from the two older children, but nonetheless pleased. “Play outside?” she suggested a bit timidly. She hadn’t at all expected to be asked for an opinion.

Milton smirked. “All right,” he said. Up the stairs they went, smiling disarmingly as they passed the grown-ups assembled in the parlor on the main floor.

Admonished to keep close to the house, Milton led Grace and Faith outside to the gardens, stopping rather dramatically before the entrance to the shaggy hedgerow maze. “Do you know what this is?” he asked Faith.

She shook her head because that seemed to be the answer he expected, although she was reasonably certain she knew what lay spread out before her.

Milton drew himself up importantly. “This is where I keep my giant pet spider.”

Faith was instantly skeptical. “There aren’t any giant spiders,” she scoffed. “You’re making that up.”

“No, I’m not,” insisted Milton. “You wanna see?”

Although the notion of seeing a real giant spider was rather frightening, logic still told Faith that the story simply couldn’t be true. So

she nodded.

“Well, come on then,” said Milton, and took off running into the maze. Grace followed, and so did Faith, trying with her shorter legs to keep the two older children in sight.

Finally, they stopped. Faith looked around at the small open space they’d reached in the center of the maze. “Where’s your spider?” she asked.

Milton looked triumphantly at Grace. “He must be hiding,” he said, giving a meaningful look to Grace. “Wait here and I’ll go find him.” He took the older girl’s hand and they started off.

“Wait!” cried Faith. “I’ll come, too.” She started after them.

“No, you wait here in case he comes back,” replied Milton. He glanced sideways at Grace and added, “Just don’t move if he does. You might startle him, and then he would wrap you up in his silk, take you to his web, and eat you.”

“But...,” Faith began.

“You’re not scared, are you?” Grace suggested.

Faith knew then that she had to stay, or her sister would tell all their friends at home what a fraidy-cat she was. So she lifted her little chin and looked at them as disdainfully as she could. “Of course not,” she answered, in a voice that only trembled a tiny bit.

“Good,” said Milton. He and Grace turned and disappeared.

For the first ten minutes after she was left alone in the maze, Faith was fine. She prowled restlessly around the small space until she realized that the only sound she could hear was that of birds chirping in the nearby trees. Ten minutes stretched into twenty. Still Faith said nothing, certain Grace and Milton were hiding just around the first corner, waiting for her to be scared so they could pounce and make fun of her.

Finally, a few minutes later, she heard voices, whispering voices, and then the musical sound of a young woman’s laughter. Faith stood and looked toward the nearest opening in the hedgerow, her head tilted inquisitively to the side.

“No, Duncan, we mustn’t!” the girl’s voice said, then fell silent for a long moment. Faith frowned at the curious wet smacking sounds and crept closer to the opening. She stopped as the girl sighed. “Mmmmmmm, *Duncan.*”

Duncan. Milton's oldest brother. He was seventeen years old and, to the young Ackerly girls, seemed nearly grown. They viewed him with an almost fearful sort of awe during family visits, which only occurred a couple times a year. He mostly ignored the smaller children, so Faith didn't really know him, and would not under other circumstances have initiated a conversation with him. Now, however, he presented an opportunity for rescue.

Relieved, Faith walked forward into the maze, following the noises. At the first turn she rounded the corner, then drew up short. Her mouth fell open and her eyes grew round. Lying on the ground not five feet away was Duncan. Underneath him was one of the chambermaids. This, although in itself a rather unusual sight, was made even more shocking by the fact that the chambermaid's rather ample breasts had spilled from her bodice...and Duncan had one of them in his mouth.

Rendered speechless for the moment, Faith stood rooted in place, unable to tear her eyes from the scene. While she watched, Duncan released the girl's nipple from his mouth with a popping sound. The maid closed her eyes and smiled when his fingers caught at the hardened morsel and squeezed. With his other hand, he pushed up her skirts until Faith could see the tops of her stockings and then, of all things, lifted the layers of material and dipped his head beneath them!

Faith gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth. Startled, the chambermaid's eyes flew open and landed on Faith, standing in shock at the end of the row.

"Duncan," the servant hissed, pushing at his head. "Stop! There's a little girl here!"

Duncan's head popped up. He looked over his shoulder, saw Faith, and scowled. Beneath him, the young servant was scrambling to a sitting position, pulling at the bodice of her uniform. "My God," she breathed. "I'll be turned out without wages for certain." She tried to stand.

Duncan put a restraining hand on her shoulder. "Stay here." He fixed Faith with a glare, his eyes narrowing. "The brat won't tell a soul. Will you, brat?"

Her heart pounding, Faith shook her head.

"Oh, leave the poor child alone." The chambermaid retrieved her mobcap from the hedge where it had snagged and pulled it over her hair.

“I’m going back to the house before I’m missed.” She pulled herself from Duncan’s grasp, stood, and almost ran down the hedgerow toward the exit.

Duncan watched, then turned back to Faith. He knelt so that his face was even with hers. “How decidedly inconvenient, brat. What are you doing here alone?”

“W-waiting for M-Milton and Grace,” she stammered. “They w-went to find Milton’s big spider.”

Duncan’s dark eyes gleamed with malice. “Milton’s spider, hmm? Well, then. I suggest you continue to do just that—wait. And if you ever tell anyone what you saw here, I’ll make sure Milton’s spider eats both you *and* your sister. Understand?”

Wordless, her gray eyes huge, Faith nodded, then turned and ran back to the center of the maze. She stopped and watched to see if Duncan would follow, but he did not. She blinked and waited and tried her best to forget what she had seen.

After an hour, Faith began to suspect her sister was not coming back. Still she did nothing, didn’t even call for help; she didn’t want to make a noise. She simply placed her back securely against a hedge and sat down to wait, her fertile imagination taking over: Grace and Milton hadn’t come back because the monstrous spider had eaten them. Worse, if the spider found out she was here, he would eat her, too. So Faith sat as still as she could, watching all four paths that exited the center of the maze for the terrifying creature to appear, silent tears of terror slipping down her dirty cheeks.

The shadows lengthened and still she sat, her heart jumping in renewed fear every time a squirrel rustled through the hedges or a bird fluttered near, but she did not make a sound, and she did not move. By now, Duncan and the spider had merged in her fertile little mind into a single entity. After all, she had seen him actually beginning to eat the chambermaid, hadn’t she?

It was only as full darkness neared that she again heard voices—those of her father and her mother and her older sister Patience—calling her name from outside the maze. But Faith didn’t answer, because she was still in the spider’s lair and knew that if he heard her, he would be able to get to her long before her mama or papa. Just as he’d gotten Grace.

The voices continued to move, surrounding her now as her family worked their way through the maze. Faith squeezed her eyes closed and prayed that the spider wouldn't eat them, too. And then she heard Grace.

"She was in the middle, Mama," sobbed her sister. "I wanted to go back and get her, but Duncan came out of the maze and chased Milton away. Then, when I asked Duncan if he'd seen Faith, he got a mean look on his face and told me he saw the spider chasing her! So I came to get you and Papa." Grace hiccuped. "I'm sorry, Mama. The spider must have eaten her by now."

Faith opened her eyes. The spider hadn't gotten Grace? She rose slowly to her feet. "Grace!" she screeched. Starting to run, Faith hurled herself through the nearest exit and around corners, crying as she went and calling her sister's name. She rounded one last corner and saw her father and Patience, but Grace wasn't with them, so she barreled past, still looking for her sister, still calling her name.

And then there she was, holding Mama's hand, crying as they walked along the overgrown path. And then she and Faith were in each other's arms, laughing and crying and safe once again from their mean cousins and the horrible spider.

It was dark when they finally left the garden, Faith holding tightly to her sister's hand as they followed their parents. But she looked back once at the shadowy entrance to the maze and shuddered at what might have happened. Her mind returned to those moments with Duncan and the chambermaid who had run off in shame. She thought about what she'd seen, and remembered how Duncan had ordered her never to discuss it. Which meant, of course, that what he was doing to that poor servant when she came upon them could only have been bad and wrong.

With firm resolve, Faith decided she would never end up in the same shameful situation as that servant girl. But just to be on the safe side, she did not merely comply with Duncan's order...she put the incident completely out of her mind.

Of course, some things never really go away.

# One

*Summer, 1813*

**I**t was rather disconcerting, and not in the least fashionable, thought Faith, for a couple, however newly wed, to behave in such a manner.

She was watching her sister Grace play impish children's games with her new husband, Trevor Caldwell, the Earl of Huntwick. This was definitely *not* the manner in which a countess should comport herself. But then, Grace had never been one to bow to the dictates of Society. And they *did* seem rather happy.

Still, the hour was growing late, and Faith was becoming weary. She looked across the crowded ballroom from her place at the head table and noticed other people stifling yawns. Fewer and fewer couples seemed to be seeking the dance floor.

Searching the room for her elder sister, Faith finally caught sight of Grace slipping into a shadowy alcove. She pondered her sister's action and realized precisely what was going on as Trevor walked past the darkened alcove a scant second later, also obviously looking for Grace. Faith thought she recognized the hands of her fifteen-year-old twin sisters in this. A moment later her suspicions were confirmed, for all three of her laughing, red-haired siblings emerged from the hiding place and scurried off in the opposite direction.

Faith sighed and propped her elbows on the table in a decidedly unladylike way, dropping her chin into her hands and wearily closing her eyes. It could be hours before the groom caught his wayward bride and they retired, thus allowing the assembled guests to follow suit. It seemed she was doomed to a late night.

"If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say Grace will certainly pay for this in the bedchamber tonight."

Shocked that anyone would say such a thing within earshot of herself or any other gently bred young lady, Faith frowned. She turned and found herself caught by the gaze of a young man with laughing brown eyes. He stood at the end of the long table at which she sat, and Faith recognized him immediately, as she knew he did her, though they had never been formally introduced. She fixed him with a glacial stare, fully intending to give him a cool setdown, but was surprised to find herself drawn in by his open, friendly face. Firmly, she repressed the unbidden urge to smile back.

Her new conversational companion was Gareth Lloyd, the younger half brother of the Earl of Seth, and he was known throughout the ton as a notorious prankster and womanizer far more interested in the pleasures of the flesh than in responsible behavior. Rumor had it that he was on strained terms with his rather staid elder brother, who thought even a second son with little hope of inheriting either title or fortune still had responsibilities to the family title, if only by extension. Gareth, it was clear, thought different. He felt life should be lived a moment at a time, embraced and enjoyed as though there were no tomorrow. Further gossip held that his days were spent in languorous inactivity, and that he could be found most evenings at one of any number of social events in Town. This in itself was not unusual, as most of the ton behaved in precisely the same manner, but Gareth, people whispered, was just as comfortable in a brothel as in a Society drawing room, as much at ease in a gambling hell as he was in White's, and would enjoy himself more at a courtesan ball than at the premier event of the Season.

He was, in short, everything the correct and proper Miss Faith Ackerly despised.

Schooling her features into a stern frown, Faith turned back around in her chair and fixed her gaze on the dance floor, summarily dismissing the owner of the compelling brown eyes without comment. Seconds later, she heard the chair next to hers being pulled out. She drew in a shocked breath at this impropriety and immediately prepared to rise and remove herself from his presence.

Gareth read her intention. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced," he said.

With great calm, Faith swung her cool gray eyes back to his. "Nor shall we be, sir. If you'll excuse me, please."

She pushed her chair away from the table and stood, abruptly turning her back on the rake to make her way across the ballroom to the place she had last seen Grace. She felt his eyes upon her every step of the way until, thankfully, the crowd closed around and swallowed her up. Only then did she allow herself to look back.

Gareth had been joined at the table by an attractive older woman Faith did not recognize. She watched as Gareth stood up, stepped close, and bent down to whisper something in the woman's ear. The brunette laughed and placed a familiar hand on his chest. There was something oddly intimate about the way they were interacting, almost as though they had forgotten they were at a wedding reception, in full view of all assembled guests. With a start of comprehension, Faith realized they must be lovers. She blushed and turned away. Fighting a strange, inexplicable sense of loss, she resumed her search for Grace.

You've scarcely looked in my direction all evening, Gareth Lloyd." Evelyn Hedgepath, the recent and very-well-provided-for widow of the elderly Viscount Blakely pouted, her full lips pursed and intentionally inviting, a reproachful look in her startling green eyes.

Gareth glanced down at the hand she'd placed on his chest. She curled her fingers into her palm and withdrew it, but kept her eyes on his.

"You forget yourself, Evelyn. Would you have me simply announce our arrangement? It is not *my* reputation that would suffer, you know." Though his words were harsh, his voice was warm with affection.

Evelyn's eyes narrowed. "Of course not. Ridiculous rules. One would think that after burying a husband, a woman might find herself exempt from scrutiny. It is a freedom men like you take for granted."

Gareth raised a brow and stepped marginally closer to the lush brunette. "You *do* enjoy freedoms, Evelyn. They just require more... discretion."

She caught her breath and looked up, eyes smoldering with practiced, calculated desire. "Come visit me tonight," she purred suggestively. "I want to taste freedom."

Gareth's eyes lifted and swept the crowd. Nobody had noticed their conversation. The members of the weary crowd were mostly interested, at



this point, in wrapping up the evening and finding their way home to their individual beds.

His eyes landed on Faith Ackerly again. She was just turning away, an odd expression on her lovely face. It was a combination of regret, disappointment, and something else—disdain, perhaps? Whatever it was, it had the effect of a bucket of ice water on his ardor.

“Not tonight, Evelyn,” he replied, and to soften the blow, lifted her hand for a kiss. “Perhaps another time. I’m going to step outside for a moment. Excuse me, please.”

Evelyn, who did *not* like being dismissed, cleared her throat. “Gareth.” He turned back and waited, a polite expression on his face.

She quirked a single eyebrow. “You and I understand one another, don’t we? Our arrangement is about one thing, and one thing only. Your skills in that area are considerable, so your lack of social standing is something I have chosen to overlook. But that means, when you choose to deny me our one shared interest, there’s simply nothing left.” She watched him carefully. “Perhaps you wish to reconsider my invitation.”

His face betrayed nothing, though his heart experienced a sharp pang at her words. Despite their rather sordid arrangement, he actually cared for Evelyn, would even have considered spending his life with her, had he anything to offer a wife. She clearly recognized that he did not.

After a long moment of silence, he bowed. “Well, my dear,” he said finally. “I shall certainly give it every consideration. Good night.” Then he turned and walked toward the doors opening out onto the terrace.

Evelyn followed his exodus with narrowed eyes. She pursed her lips and looked around. *Insolent, untitled pup*, she thought. If he was not willing to share her bed tonight, she could most certainly find someone who would.

Out on the shadowy terrace, Gareth lit a cheroot and strolled up to the stone balustrade, looking out into the dark gardens in brooding silence. After a moment, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, warning him that he was no longer alone.

“It wouldn’t do to trifle with the Ackerly girl, Gareth.”

Gareth clenched his jaw in irritation and deliberately failed to turn; he made no physical effort to acknowledge his half brother’s presence. Smiling angrily into the darkness, he said, “Ahh, the ever-present, ever-vigilant Earl of Seth. To what ‘trifling’ incident do you refer?”

Jonathon Lloyd stared inexorably at Gareth's back, wishing not for the first time that such a wall of resentment did not hinder their communication. "The incident about which I am the most concerned is the one that will undoubtedly occur between yourself and Hunt, should you toy with her affections. Do not forget she is the sister of his new countess."

Fury made Gareth turn. "Do you think I'd actually endanger that friendship in such away? Or is it that you think me so selfish, the only reason I'd converse with a woman is to prepare her for a tumble in the sheets?"

"I have only recent history upon which to base my judgments, Gareth." Jonathon's voice was severe.

Gareth smiled with scathing contempt as he flicked his cheroot away into the inky blackness of the gardens below. "At the risk of sounding trite, my lord, I'll remind you it is not always wise to judge a book by its cover." Then he stepped neatly around his brother and returned to the ballroom.

Inside, he swept the room with angry eyes, looking for Evelyn. Her invitation was suddenly more attractive, despite the bitter sting of her clarification regarding their agreement. When he didn't find her, he decided to leave, fed up with the social protocol of waiting for Trevor and his bride to say their good-nights. He retrieved his hat and cape from the underbutler.

Stepping outside, he was just in time to see Evelyn being handed up into a coach by a gentleman he did not recognize. He glanced at the seal on the door but could not quite make it out. When he looked at Evelyn again, he found her eyes upon him. She smiled a cold, dangerous smile, then with deliberate intent looked away and disappeared into the interior of the coach. Her escort followed.

Gareth watched the coach pull away, then walked down the steps to summon his own conveyance, swearing under his breath. Evelyn, he decided, was free to enjoy the eager fumbings of her new and titled lover for as long as she wished. Eventually she would discover she missed his skill.

## Two

*Fall, 1813*

**T**own is rather bare of company for the Little Season this year, Faith. I greatly fear that you'll be bored."

Grace and Faith were seated in the well-appointed drawing room of the Earl of Seth's town house, waiting to see Amanda Lloyd, their very good friend and the earl's wife. Faith had left London shortly after her sister's wedding to return home to Pelthamshire, a small village northwest of the city, and neither young woman had seen Amanda in months.

Faith waved a dismissing hand at her elder sister. "Nonsense," she said. "Besides, it wasn't my intention to come to London for the social whirl. Patience sent me to keep you company during your confinement."

Grace laughed, glancing down at her stomach, which was still nearly flat, although she was almost five months into her pregnancy. "Now that the horrid sickness has passed, I sometimes find it difficult to believe I'm actually carrying Trevor's child."

"Papa said it was the same way when Mama carried us. Her condition never became evident until extremely late," replied Faith.

"Which hardly seems fair to me," came Amanda's warm voice from the doorway. The Ackerly sisters smiled and rose to greet her, enjoying the radiant look on the face of their very dear and also pregnant—*very* pregnant—friend. "I started increasing quite nearly as soon as I discovered I was with child."

"Ah, but you had none of the dreadful sickness I've had to endure," Grace reminded her.

"Yes," agreed Amanda. "But you've yet to complain of even a twinge of back pain."

Grace opened her mouth to retort, but didn't get a chance. "Please stop," Faith cut in with a musical laugh. "You'll both have me terrified of

ever bearing a child if you don't cease arguing over who's suffering more. Whatever happened to the 'Radiant Glow of Impending Motherhood' we were all promised as children?"

All three women laughed and sat down to bring each other up to date. Grace and Trevor had only just returned from the Willows, their country estate, while Amanda and Jonathon had remained in town to be nearer her physician.

"How are your father and sisters?" Amanda asked.

"Doing well. The twins begged Patience to allow them to come along with me, but she insisted they wait another year, of course."

"And your father?"

"Papa's spent the last ten weeks holed up in his study, writing," replied Faith.

Grace smiled fondly, remembering all the time she had spent in that same study taking lessons from her learned father. "What is the subject this time?"

"I believe he was on his fourth title when I left, which was *A Treatise on the Effects of Gravity as It Pertains to One's Age and Health*."

Amanda giggled. "My, what a mouthful," she said. "And Mercy?"

Grace laughed. The youngest of the Ackerly sisters had a healthy crush on the much older Duke of Blackthorne, who was a great friend of both Amanda's and Grace's husbands. "Mercy instructed Faith to tell Lord Blackthorne that she is no longer *merely* thirteen."

"When I pointed out to her that she had, in reality, only just turned thirteen a few months ago," Faith added, "she scolded me quite soundly and informed me that His Grace would be 'most impressed to find me much improved at nearly fourteen.' And so I promised to deliver her message if I chance upon the duke."

"Oh, I wish I could be there to see Sebastian's face," crowed Amanda. "Nothing and nobody, except your little sister, ever seems to discomfit him!"

"Speaking of siblings, how is your brother-in-law these days?" Grace had a real fondness for Gareth Lloyd, despite the public bet he'd placed earlier that year which had almost cost her Trevor's love. She found him witty and charming, and at heart a very kind person.

Amanda looked taken aback. “Actually, I’m surprised you haven’t already heard the news. Gareth is out of town attending to his new estate. He has, it seems, become the new Marquess of Roth.”

Faith wrinkled her brow, trying to place the old Marquess of Roth. Nothing came to mind except her friend’s brother-in-law and his laughing brown eyes, and she found this inexplicably irritating. She brushed the feeling aside. “How is it that your husband didn’t inherit the title?”

“Jonathon and Gareth are only half brothers. This inheritance came from a distant cousin of Gareth’s mother, who was, of course, no relation to my husband.”

“And he had no idea he was in line for a title?” asked Grace.

Amanda shook her head. “Not until the solicitor showed up on our doorstep. Apparently, the former marquess was a rather reclusive old man who never got married. He spent his time amassing huge sums of money by investing and reinvesting his fortune. From what the solicitor said, money seemed to be his only companion.”

Grace raised her eyebrows. “So not only did Gareth inherit a title, but there was a large fortune to go with it?”

Amanda nodded. “Although, apparently the old man never actually spent any of his money unless he was perfectly certain there would be some kind of a return on his investment, so the estate was literally falling down around his ears. Gareth wrote last week that he was finding stacks of money hidden everywhere, and that the old man had employed no servants, because he trusted no one. Gareth doubts that he’ll ever even find all of the money.”

“You do know what this means, don’t you?”

Amanda and Grace turned to look at Faith, whose matter-of-fact tone indicated that she had, as usual, already dismissed the deliciously romantic appeal of the story and gone straight to the heart of the matter.

“What’s that?” asked Amanda.

“Your little brother is about to become the catch of the Season.”

Grace looked at Amanda and grinned. “Indeed. Looks like it’s time for little Gareth to grow up!”

Faith raised dubious eyebrows. “I’ll believe *that* when I see it.”

This place is an absolute disgrace, Gareth,” said Jonathon Lloyd, gingerly kicking aside a sizable chunk of plaster that had fallen at some point from the ceiling of the musty library. He walked across the room and propped his Hessianclad foot upon an unidentifiable piece of covered furniture, intending to inspect the highly glossed toe of the boot for damage. He never got the chance. His actions raised such a cloud of dust that he promptly removed his foot and retreated to a safe distance, scowling.

Gareth raised his eyebrows in amusement. “A disgrace it may be, big brother, but Rothmere is *my* disgrace. Besides, I like it. I think the estate has enormous possibilities.”

Jonathon lifted his eyebrows and glanced around. “Possibilities for what, pray tell? Immediate demolition?”

“Possibilities for improvement, of course.” Gareth grinned and walked out of the room.

Jonathon followed. “Surely, you don’t mean to live here,” he protested.

“On the contrary. I do and I shall.”

“But the expense involved in renovating—”

“I can afford it,” cut in Gareth.

“You’ll likely have to tear the house down and begin anew with the foundation,” warned Jon, looking around and wearing a grave expression.

“If I must, then I must.”

Seeing that his brother had his mind set, Jon fell silent for a moment, then changed the subject. “I suppose you mean to stay with us until the place is habitable.”

“No. But thank you for the kind invitation,” said Gareth, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “I’ll be taking a town house in London, but I won’t stay there until next Season at the very earliest.”

Although shocked at both the uncharacteristic interest Gareth was taking in his plans and the fact that his socially inclined brother intended to miss the Little Season, Jon merely raised his eyebrows. “Well, if you’ve decided to stay here, please do me a favor and take the time to name your heir. This place seems rather likely to tumble down around you as you sleep.”

“The caretaker’s cottage is where I’ll stay for the time being.” Gareth’s eyes turned thoughtful at the mention of an heir. It summoned ancillary thoughts of marriage—something he’d always intended to do for love, not

out of a sense of duty. Frowning, he added, “I do suppose I’ll have to think about heirs now, won’t I?”

Jonathon glanced about himself with eloquent distaste. “Perhaps you should first think about giving them something to inherit.”

# Three

*Winter, 1813*

Faith and Grace bent over the cradle to look more closely at the sleeping infant, and both women took a quick step back in alarm when he turned his head and yawned hugely. They glanced at each other, wondering if they should do something or call for someone.

Amanda laughed softly from behind them. "He isn't terribly fragile, you know."

Grace looked back just in time to see little baby Geoffrey shove the better part of his fist into his mouth. She stifled a giggle, and the three women tiptoed out of the nursery.

"I just know I'll be a dismal failure as a mother," Grace sighed once they were safely in the hall and out of danger of waking the child.

Faith raised an eyebrow. "You'll do fine, of course," she said.

"Of course you will," added Amanda for good measure.

Grace looked down at the small swell just showing beneath her skirts. "Suppose I break it?" She looked suddenly alarmed. "I break nearly everything I touch."

Amanda burst out laughing, but Faith remained unperturbed as they walked downstairs to the salon where their tea awaited them. "You'll either feed it or change it when it cries, let it sleep a great deal of the time, and give it kisses and hugs in between. How hard can that be?"

They all sat down, and though Grace still looked doubtful, she changed the subject. "How is Lord Seth enjoying fatherhood?" she asked Amanda, lifting her cup and sipping the freshly poured brew.

Amanda looked over her shoulder at the open doorway. Seeing no one there, she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "He's positively devoted to Geoffrey. I sometimes find him in the nursery just staring down at him, and once I caught him just as he was sitting down to rock him."



Grace looked astonished at the thought of the staid Earl of Seth rocking an infant to sleep. Faith just looked amused.

“Of course, I very quietly left the room. He always pretends he was in the nursery for some completely different reason if he knows I’ve seen him.” Amanda smiled happily. “It’s all rather endearing. But please,” she said as her friends nodded in agreement, “you must tell me what is going on in Town. It feels as though it’s been years since I’ve heard any gossip!”

“Well—,” Faith began, but was interrupted by a commotion in the foyer, which caused Amanda to excuse herself and walk toward the door.

“I beg your pardon, ladies,” came a warm male voice. “Amanda, is Jon in?”

Grace was seated facing the doorway, and her eyes suddenly grew very wide. Faith, who had her back to the door, turned at once to see who was there, but she was unable to see around Amanda into the foyer. She listened to her friend direct the unknown man to Jonathon’s study and caught a glimpse of dusty riding clothes and a slightly familiar, very tanned face before it disappeared and Amanda returned to sit down.

“Good heavens, Amanda. Wasn’t that Gareth?” asked Grace. He’d looked so serious—almost grim—in the brief moment she’d seen him, which was at odds with the lighthearted man she’d known the previous year. “I hadn’t heard he was back in London.”

Faith looked back at the empty doorway with a frown. “Didn’t you say he was in the country, renovating his new estate?”

“Yes, but he had Jon close a deal for him on a town house in Upper Brook Street, and he’s come to sign the papers. He’ll spend the night tonight, but he’s going right back out to Rothmere early in the morning.”

“He’s changed a great deal since my wedding,” remarked Grace thoughtfully. “He seems...older.”

Amanda raised her eyebrows. “He’s been rather preoccupied with getting settled just now. I don’t think he’s changed *too* much, but Jon has mentioned how well he has adapted to the responsibilities of his new title.”

Faith looked skeptical. “It’s probably all rather like a new toy to him—a toy in which he’ll eventually lose interest.”

Grace looked at her sister in surprise, for Faith rarely gave voice to her opinions, and almost never spoke of anyone in a negative way. “Why would you say that, Faith?”

“It’s evident from his actions and reputation,” she replied. “He’s certainly made no attempt to hide his many love affairs, and he has a history of making ridiculously impulsive decisions with no regard for the way they might affect the lives of others.”

Amanda looked troubled. “You’re wrong,” she said, her brow furrowed. “You haven’t known Gareth as I have. You’ve only seen the side he presents to Society. I’ve always wondered why he allows the impression that he is nothing but frivolous...” She trailed off, lost in thought.

Faith, already regretting her uncharacteristically impulsive speech, looked uncertainly at Grace, who shrugged.

Amanda shook off her reverie, glanced at the door, and leaned closer to her friends, her voice lowered. “We almost lost him a couple years ago, you know.”

Grace shook her head. “I had no idea. Was he sick?”

“No. Jonathon and Gareth have long disagreed on nearly everything, though the bond between them is strong. Jon raised him, you see, after their father and Gareth’s mother died in an accident. And Jon was a little...” She bit her lip. “Well, he was rather strict. Gareth wasn’t reared in the same manner as Jon. Gareth’s mother was a lovely thing, much younger than their father, with a lighthearted spirit and very different ideas than most of Society on the way children should be raised. There were no governesses for Gareth, no overbearing tutors who punished mistakes rather than praising accomplishments. His mother wanted him to enjoy his childhood, and she didn’t want to miss a single second of it.”

Grace leaned forward, rapt, but Faith sat still, her expression carefully blank. Nonetheless, her heart was softening. It sounded like the sort of marriage of which she’d always dreamed, the way she’d pictured things as a little girl playing tea party with dolls as guests in her imagined home. But she firmly pushed aside the romantic train of thought. Thus far, she’d heard nothing that excused Gareth’s adult behavior.

“Gareth was eight when his mother and the earl died. Jon, as I said, was raised quite differently. There was the title to consider, and their father, though indulgent with his second wife, had been distant from his first. I’m not sure Jon’s mother and father actually ever interacted with one another after he was born. She’d fulfilled her requirement. She sickened and died when Jon was an infant. Utterly at a loss as to how to raise a child, the old

earl hired a strict nanny, followed by strict governesses and strict tutors. By the time his father remarried, Jon was away, first at Eton, and then at Cambridge.”

Faith felt her heart wrench a little for Jonathon and the lonely existence Amanda described. It helped explain the outward aloofness he presented. She thought about how differently she and Grace, also motherless, had been raised. Warmth had pervaded their home, and laughter. Love and light. Her heart softened, and she nodded, listening.

Another quick glance at the doorway assured Amanda they were still alone, and she continued. “Jon had no example before him, other than the childhood he’d experienced. He stepped into the title with ease, but found the task of raising a child as irrepressible as Gareth a far larger challenge than the intricacies of running the estate and representing the title. Tutor after tutor failed. Governesses wouldn’t stay. Jon was mystified, and the gulf between the two brothers widened as Gareth grew older. By the time I married Jonathon, they’d slipped into a pattern of Gareth taunting, Jon disapproving, and neither willing to budge an inch toward compromise. I did what I could, but it was a very short time before they had a disagreement that escalated into a full-fledged shouting match that almost shook the walls. The things they said to one another were horrible. In the end, Gareth left the house, got roaringly drunk, and joined the army.”

Faith shook her head at what she considered yet another impulsive act of sublime stupidity, one that only enhanced the opinion she already had of him, but Grace looked fascinated. “Good gracious! Gareth in the army? I can’t quite reconcile such an image.”

Amanda nodded. “And he didn’t even purchase a commission. He joined and went to fight on the Continent, just like any other man. By the time we realized what he’d done, he was long gone. Jon hired Bow Street runners to find him, and they eventually did.” She stopped and swallowed hard. “They came and told him Gareth was in France, that he had been gravely wounded, that his prognosis was questionable and that he could not be moved.”

Her friends stared at her. Even Faith forgot her decided disapproval of Gareth and was spellbound. To their knowledge, none of this story had ever been discussed; certainly they’d not previously heard of Gareth’s military connection.

“Jon went, ensured Gareth had the best of care, satisfied himself that he would recover, and came home. I don’t think Gareth even knows to this day that his brother was there at all. But when Gareth recovered enough to come home, he did so as though he hadn’t a care in the world. He and Jon still disagree on most things, but there is a tentative, unspoken truce between them, as if they’ve each silently agreed never to let things go that far again.

“And now he has something new upon which to focus, something entirely his own,” Amanda finished with a smile. “Perhaps it will be the making of him. Now you and the rest of the ton will learn to see him as I always have: as a kind but conflicted young man who is trying to find his way.”

Faith’s eyes returned to the empty doorway and lingered for a moment. She had been quiet to this point, listening to the story, adding the new information to the facts she already had about Gareth. She would allow it all to sink in before beginning to consider revising her impression of him.

## Four

*Spring, 1814*

**B**athed in a glow of serene happiness, Faith walked down the curving staircase to the floor of the immense ballroom, flanked on one side by her aunt, Lady Cleo Egerton, and on the other by Amanda Lloyd. As she descended, she looked around for some of the friends she was accustomed to seeing whenever she attended a Town event.

It was, for Faith, her second Season out, although in a way this was really her debut. The previous year she and Grace were presented to Society at the same time, and although it had never been Grace's intention to attract a husband, everyone had expected her to be the first to wed and treated Faith appropriately. Grace, of course, had attracted the Earl of Huntwick, who was at the time Society's Most Eligible.

As of yet, and despite Faith's prediction, Society had not quite made up its collective mind about the man who should replace Trevor as the newest catch of the Season. There were many candidates who were willing to take the role, of course, but none really fit all of the requirements.

By far the richest and most powerful of those widely considered were Sebastian Tremaine, the Duke of Blackthorne, and his distant cousin Lachlan Kimball, the Scottish Marquess of Asheburton. Certainly both of these men were titled, rich, powerful, and undeniably handsome. The problem was that neither man was even remotely accessible, for Asheburton kept mostly to himself on his estate in Scotland, and Blackthorne also rarely made appearances in Town. Whenever the latter did attend a ton function, his icy demeanor and strange golden eyes made him virtually unapproachable.

Gareth Lloyd had also rocketed upward in esteem, as foreseen. A mere younger son the Season before, Gareth was always considered a decent catch by virtue of his connections and popularity, if one was willing to

settle for a man with a smallish fortune and a noble relation, though, sadly, no title of his own. That had changed, of course, this Season, when he had been named the new Marquess of Roth. And when the rumors flew at the beginning of the Season that the title came with a staggering hidden fortune, the new marquess had been instantly added to the list of possible Most Eligibles. But like Asheburton and Blackthorne, as the Season wore on, Gareth failed to make an appearance in Town. The rumors began to fade, although occasional wild speculation broke out here and there.

Which left Lord Jameson. Horatio Aaron Grimsby, the Earl of Jameson, was an average-looking gentleman of average height, average intelligence, and average fortune. There was nothing spectacularly *wrong* with Lord Jameson, but neither could it be said that there was anything particularly *right* about him. He was so singularly uninteresting, it was only by default that he could be considered the most eligible bachelor of the Season.

Faith Ackerly, on the other hand, was enjoying immense popularity. Proclaimed an “Incomparable” almost from the moment she stepped into her first London ballroom, she’d been all the rage during her first Season, and was even more so this year, despite her height and regal, almost aloof distance. Her cool beauty was magnetic, and the calm kindness she displayed in conversation gave the ton dandies ample reason to overlook the tiny flaw of being a bit taller than the average debutante.

Thus, Horatio Grimsby wanted her. And so it was that only seconds after they reached the foot of the stairs, Faith, Amanda, and Aunt Cleo found themselves in the company of the awkward, determined nobleman.

“Miss Ackerly,” the earl enthused, quite forgetting that proper etiquette demanded he address first Lady Egerton, then Lady Seth, and last of all Faith. He lifted her hand for a kiss, clumsily catching her dangling dance card on the stud at the cuff of his sleeve in the process. “You look as lovely as ever—lovelier, in fact,” he corrected himself, tugging in vain at the mess he’d created while Faith hid her exasperation behind a gracious smile. The offending stud finally came apart just as a hush was stealing across the room. “Got it!” crowed Jameson, his voice echoing into the sudden silence as the separate halves of the stud clattered to the floor and disappeared in opposite directions.

Her hand freed, Faith frowned and looked around to try to discover what had caused the gathered crowd to grow so suddenly quiet. The faces around her were all turned up to the top of the stairs, so she turned also, just as the butler bellowed, "*The Marquess of Roth! The Earl of Seth!*" to announce the arrivals to an astonished crowd.

Furious whispers broke out all across the room, but they faded to the back of Faith's comprehension. She watched Gareth Lloyd descend the stairs next to his half brother. Gone seemed the prankster with the laughing brown eyes who had made the outrageous remark at her sister's wedding the year before. This man seemed stronger, harder, more powerful.

And he was staring straight at her.

When the pair of noblemen gained the ballroom floor, the crowd surged toward the stairs, crowding around Faith, Amanda, and Cleo in an effort to be the first to greet the new marquess. Gareth sent Faith a last, strangely assessing look before he reluctantly pulled his attention from her to the mass converging around him.

"Goodness, Faith," said Aunt Cleo with a thump of her ever-present cane. "Looks as though Roth is as interested in you as Jameson here." She poked Horatio, who was now holding his cuff closed with his free hand, with the end of her walking stick. It was a remark characteristic of the blunt old dowager, but even so, Horatio turned an unbecoming shade of red and abruptly excused himself.

Amanda laughed sympathetically. "That poor little man. I suppose he'll go home with his tail between his legs," she said.

Faith looked reproachfully at Aunt Cleo, who glared back. "Well, it's true. That boy was drinking you in like a thirsty man, and you didn't do a thing to discourage him!"

"Oh, Aunt Cleo, it's hardly Lord Jameson's fault he's a trifle uncomfortable with himself and has a bit of trouble with expression. It wouldn't be kind of me to treat him coldly."

Cleo looked at Faith as if she were daft. "I wasn't talking about that little pea brain. He hasn't a clue how to go about getting a proper wife. I was talking about Roth, of course."

Taken aback, Faith looked toward the steps where Gareth and Jon were still besieged by well-wishers. She shrugged. "I doubt he even remembers

my name,” she prevaricated, and linking her arm through Amanda’s, turned, and strolled away.

Evelyn Hedgepath wasn’t nearly as dismissive of the Marquess of Roth’s first social appearance. She, like everyone else in Town, had heard of his improved circumstances and elevated rank, and had given considerable thought as to how she might go about renewing her relationship with him. Given his long absence from Society, however, she’d had no opportunity to do so.

But now here he was in the flesh. She smiled speculatively, flipped open her fan, and waited for the opportunity to present itself.

Much later, Faith stepped out onto the balcony and breathed a sigh of relief. Not only was the noise of the five hundred or so invited guests nearly deafening, and the heat from the chandeliers and so many bodies crowded so closely together exhausting, but she’d been beset by suitors from nearly the moment she’d arrived. It wasn’t that this ball was any different from the dozens she’d already attended this Season—it was filled with the same people, and held the same amusements as any other, with one notable exception. This ball had the Marquess of Roth in attendance.

The second he’d appeared, debutantes and their mamas had begun thrusting themselves at him in droves, which left an unusually large number of men with no young ladies to tease, cajole, and dance attendance upon except Faith, who seemed to be the only unmarried female in the room who was not falling all over Gareth Lloyd.

And so Faith, who was usually quite accustomed to being surrounded by men, suddenly found herself overwhelmed with requests to dance, offers to fetch refreshment, and astoundingly flowery compliments, all designed to garner her exclusive attention. After a couple hours of endless smiles, thank-yous, and curtsies, Faith had had enough.

Aunt Cleo had long since abandoned her for friends, and Amanda had been rescued by her husband, so Faith gave the throng of admirers a last gracious smile and excused herself to find the ladies’ retiring room. She slipped gratefully inside and sank down on a cushioned stool, rubbing her temples and closing her eyes in blessed relief. Unfortunately, her peace was not destined to last. No sooner had she settled herself than a group of



chattering young ladies entered the room, arguing over the silly subject of to whom Gareth had paid the most attention. Faith listened for a moment and felt her head begin to throb anew. She reluctantly stood and left, completely unnoticed.

She made her way unchallenged along the back wall of the ballroom, eyed the French doors that led to the terrace, then decided she'd find no peace there either. She ducked around a corner and up the back staircase to a deserted hallway. Down the hall to her left was another chance at solitude: a pair of doors led to a balcony.

Counting on finally getting a modicum of silence, she walked down the hall, opened the doors, slipped outside, and closed the doors behind her. She stepped at once to the wrought-iron railing and leaned on it, turning her face up to the cool night sky. Peace at last.

Sighing in relief, she peered out over the darkened gardens, then braced her hands on the railing, leaning over and looking down at the terrace below. She heard a smattering of giggles and excited girlish chatter just before the same group of girls she'd encountered in the retiring room walked into view. Silently, she congratulated herself on the decision to not try the terrace doors.

"Do you think he's out there somewhere?" All the girls looked out into the shadowed gardens, where dozens of daring couples had already disappeared.

"Well, he has to be somewhere. He's not in the ballroom anymore," answered another.

"Maybe he left," said a small, uncertain voice that barely managed to float up to the second-floor balcony.

"He'd better not have!" exclaimed a petite brunette. "My mama said she got him to agree to a dance with me later in the evening."

Someone opened the doors to the ballroom at that moment, allowing the noise of laughter, music, and conversation to escape. The girls turned as a group, disappearing first from view and then from hearing as the doors closed again, dimming the sounds of the ball to a welcome dull roar in the background.

Faith straightened and rolled her eyes, again looking out into the garden. She knew without question that Roth was the "he" to whom the gaggle referred. Laying one hand on her heart, she reached the other out

into the inky blackness. “My lord Gareth,” she said in a voice laced with exaggerated pleading. “If you’re out there, anywhere, please reveal yourself to me so that I can also bask in your noble glow.”

“Actually, Miss Ackerly, I’m a bit closer than you might have thought.”

Faith nearly jumped out of her skin, then whirled around. “My lord,” she said tautly. “You might have let me know you were there.”

Gareth stayed where he was, one boot propped on a stone bench at the shadowy end of the balcony. “I believe I just did,” he drawled, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a flat gold case. “Do you mind?” he asked, opening the case and selecting a thin cheroot.

Faith shook her head and walked as erectly as she could to the doors, nearly drowning in mortification.

Gareth stopped in the act of lighting the cheroot, his foot coming off the bench as he took a step toward her. “Please don’t go on my account, Miss Ackerly.” He swept out an arm to encompass the area. “The balcony is large enough for us both.”

Faith said nothing but stopped with her hand on the doorknob. It *was* rather peaceful out here, and she supposed she was being a bit churlish. Still, there was always the chance someone would discover she was out on this dark balcony without a chaperone, in the company of a notorious rake. It would certainly be prudent, though less comfortable, for her to leave.

She pondered both options for a long moment. In the end, comfort won—and the possibility that he was more as Amanda Lloyd believed than rumor might suggest. Neither was reason enough alone to make her stay. Taken together, however, it was enough to convince her. She turned back to Gareth with a polite smile and kept her tone conversational. “What made you seek a moment of solitude at this, one of the premier events of the Season, my lord?”

This, Gareth thought, was a conversation he did not want to have with this particular young lady. Obviously, she was one of the very few in attendance who had neither witnessed nor heard about the altercation near the dance floor between himself and Evelyn Hedgepath, who had almost thrown herself into his arms despite the crowd of onlookers. Taken by surprise, Gareth had pointedly and physically moved her aside before continuing on his way. When she persisted following after him, he’d been

forced to tell her, quite firmly and publicly, that he did not wish to be in her company.

Instead of explaining, Gareth smiled around his cheroot. "I suspect it was precisely the same thing that made *you* search out a quiet spot," he said.

She squinted at him, wondering if he was making fun of her in some obscure way; then she realized he was being perfectly serious. "I must confess," she said hesitantly, "that I never suspected you'd find popularity such a burden."

Gareth smiled wryly. "I guess it just seems as though the attraction is much less to me, and more to the damned title. I spent all of last Season going to the same parties, greeting the same people, and doing the same things that I am doing tonight, yet half the people to whom I've spoken this evening are introducing themselves as if we'd never met."

Faith nodded in sympathetic agreement. "This Society in which we move does seem to operate by a rather odd set of rules, does it not?" She strolled back to the railing and leaned a hip against it, allowing the cool breeze to gently lift the wispy tendrils of hair that lay around her face and neck.

Gareth nodded, studying her cameo-perfect profile as she looked away into the night sky. He took an involuntary step forward. "Odder still is the fact that the same mamas thrusting their daughters under my nose tonight advised them that I was a disreputable rake to be avoided at all costs six months ago."

Faith slanted a look at him. "Are you?"

"Am I what?" he asked, momentarily distracted by the way the moonlight turned her pale hair to spun silver. His eyes followed a long curl to where it lay against the creamy swells rising from the bodice of her gown.

"Never mind," said Faith with a touch of irony in her voice, watching the direction of his gaze. "I believe you just answered my question."

Gareth looked up swiftly and found himself imprisoned by her expressionless gray eyes. He shrugged, and grinned sheepishly. "Guilty, I'm afraid, on all counts."

Faith remained silent, reminded of all the things she despised about him. The man of her dreams would be handsome, gentle, and attentive, not

overt and...and...She blushed a little. The Marquess of Roth just seemed so...*ravenous*.

Gareth watched the trace of color steal across her face and wondered at the direction of Faith's thoughts. The faint strains of a waltz floated up to them through the closed doors of the terrace below, and he ached, suddenly, to feel her in his arms. "Do you dance, Miss Ackerly?"

"Much more often than I care to," she replied in a cool tone.

"It must be that your partners have been less than inspiring, princess." His voice held a soft husky tone.

Faith found herself suddenly intrigued, despite everything. Provoked by this unwonted response, she took a small step back. "Ah, but not a one has been either disreputable or an admitted rake, as you are, my lord, nor did they take to calling me by inappropriate nicknames, as you now have," she admonished.

Gareth moved closer, undeterred. "Would you care to dance with me?"

Faith arched a brow. "Here?" she asked dubiously, looking around.

"Why not? It's a trifle narrow, but sufficiently long, I think."

She remained impassive.

"It'll be fun," he added in a cajoling tone that made Faith picture how very endearing he must have been as a little boy.

She looked at his outstretched hand and felt an irrepressible urge to take it, to throw caution to the winds and allow him to whirl her away down the balcony. Biting her lip, she considered. One of the reasons she didn't enjoy dancing was that she was uncommonly tall for a woman. Most men were either her height or only slightly taller, and some were even shorter. She lifted her eyes from Gareth's outstretched hand to his face and realized he was a good four or five inches taller than she.

Feeling suddenly shy, she placed her hand in his and saw him smile. Slowly, he drew her near. And then his arms were around her and he was leading her down the balcony in a dipping, sweeping waltz that took her breath and had her laughing helplessly.

Gareth looked down at Faith's animated face as he expertly swung around and started back up the way they'd come. What a difference a smile made! This young woman's beauty was undeniable. She'd always been considered an Incomparable, a cool classic blonde whose perfect features appeared sculpted from the purest white marble. Her glorious hair was

always pulled smoothly back in a sedate chignon, never a strand out of place, and without fail she dressed in the demure, pale pastel colors society deemed proper for a young, unmarried female. But it was with great pleasure that Gareth learned the icily perfect Faith Ackerly was utterly entrancing when she smiled: her large gray eyes became a sparkling silver, a becoming flush rose to her alabaster cheeks, and she allowed him a tantalizing glimpse of even, white teeth.

He pulled her imperceptibly closer, thrilled when she didn't resist, highly conscious of how perfectly she fit in his arms.

As Gareth smiled down at her, Faith realized she'd never quite felt so completely at ease while dancing. Always there was the necessity of making polite conversation while managing to avoid having her feet trampled—or worse, ignoring the sharp ache between her shoulder blades when she was obliged to try and make herself shrink so as not to tower over a shorter man. She wasn't sure if it was the expert way he whirled her, the fact that she was so unused to actually looking up at her partner, or the tender look in his soft brown eyes that was making her dizzy, but she suddenly felt it imperative that she move closer, for she was perfectly certain her knees would fail her and that she would fall in an undignified heap at his feet at any moment.

Gareth pulled her fully against him, slowing the pace until they were merely standing in place, gently swaying to the distant music. Faith's head was nestled against his shoulder and he bent his head to breathe in the scent of her, a beguiling combination of soap and fresh flowers that made him want to free her hair from its confining pins and bury his face in it. He chuckled softly, his breath warm against her ear.

"I can't believe anyone could call you an ice princess."

The second the words passed his lips, he regretted them. Faith Ackerly stiffened and stepped back and out of his arms, two bright spots of color flaring on her cheeks.

Hot shame at the way she'd forgotten herself was flooding her senses. She belatedly recalled the way he'd openly flirted with his lover at her sister's wedding. It warred with the odd yearning she had to ignore common sense, to stay in his arms, but somehow Faith managed to keep her head up and her voice firm. "Good night, Lord Roth," she said tautly, then walked

with dignified grace to the doors, opened them, and disappeared back inside the house.

Gareth watched her go, his arms suddenly painfully empty. The chill night air quickly replaced the radiant smile that had warmed his soul. He leaned against the rail, his thoughts returning to the conversation he'd had with his brother at Rothmere. The entire reason he'd come to Town for the season was to see to the business of an heir for the title. And in order to create an heir, he first needed to obtain a wife.

London, he was learning, was positively *littered* with young women who would dearly love to become his wife.

He grimaced. Actually, he amended wryly, London was littered with young women who would dearly love to become a marchioness. He considered the hordes of simpering debutantes who had been thrust beneath his nose before he'd escaped to this balcony, and compared them with Faith Ackerly.

There was no contest.

A touch of the prankster from his past returned, and he grinned, suddenly vastly entertained by the notion of courting the lovely, if prim, Miss Ackerly. If he had to find a wife, he saw no reason why he shouldn't enjoy the process. He straightened and walked to the doors, his mind made up. The young lady was entirely too controlled and proper, which were both excellent qualities in a marchioness...but he wanted more from his wife.

Yes, he decided, Faith Ackerly could definitely use some shaking up.

## *Five*

**P**erched on the window seat with her legs curled beneath her and an embroidery hoop in her hand, Faith looked every inch the serene, gently bred young lady Society saw daily. Her face was calm as she looked out over the gardens, and she allowed her hands to fall idle for a moment as she lost herself in a short daydream. Then, as if the reverie brought unpleasant thoughts, she thinned her lips and returned her attention to her needlework, repeatedly stabbing the needle through the linen with far more force than accuracy.

“Is it dead yet?” Grace asked jokingly from the small writing desk where she sat patiently writing what seemed like endless thank-you notes for gifts sent to welcome her son, Christian, into her household.

Faith looked up in chagrin when she realized what she was doing. She surveyed the damage to the delicate linen collar she was embroidering, then sighed and began pulling out stitches.

“Do you want to talk about it?” It was unlike Faith to get so worked up, and Grace found herself genuinely worried about whatever was bothering her sister. Faith shook her head, which was not surprising. Where Grace had a tendency to blurt out everything that crossed her mind, Faith was more introspective, usually preferring to keep her concerns private until she’d worked them out for herself.

At the discreet knock on the open door of the salon, Grace looked over her shoulder. Hovering on the threshold was her favorite footman. The short, round servant once worked for her aunt but had come to work in the Caldwells’ London town house shortly after her marriage. She smiled sweetly at him. “Yes, O’Reilly?”

“More flowers have been delivered for Miss Faith, my lady.”

Grace glanced at her sister, who hadn’t moved. “Just keep the card and send them to the hospital with the others, please.”

“Yes, my lady.” O’Reilly hesitated. “It’s just that they’re a bit more voluminous than the usual bouquets,” he explained.

“Voluminous?” Grace asked curiously. Faith slowly turned her head, a strange expression dawning on her face.

“Well, *larger*,” clarified O’Reilly.

Faith stood abruptly. “Whom are they from?”

“Why Miss Faith, I’d never presume to—”

“Whom?” she repeated, narrowing her eyes.

O’Reilly’s mouth snapped shut and he drew himself up as much as his short, portly frame would allow. “The Marquess of Roth,” he said.

Faith tossed the embroidery hoop on the window seat and stalked out of the room and into the foyer.

She stopped abruptly and gasped in shock. Before her stood the most enormous flower arrangement she’d ever beheld. It was a small tree, really, in a large clay pot, with iris and larkspur and pink and white daisies woven with ribbons throughout the branches to create a delicate, colorful pattern. Behind her, she heard Grace enter the foyer and echo her surprise.

Annoyed, Faith walked up to the enormous bouquet. “Where’s the note?” she asked O’Reilly.

“Actually, I was hoping to deliver the note by hand,” came a mocking voice from beyond the open door. Gareth appeared from behind the tree, a white envelope in his out-stretched hand.

Grace stifled a giggle.

“Take it out of here!” commanded Faith in her best no-nonsense tone.

“The note?”

“The...” She gestured toward the tree. “Whatever *this* is.”

“You don’t like it?” asked Gareth in a hurt voice. His brown eyes glowed with amusement, which only irritated Faith further.

“No,” she answered shortly, then pressed her lips together in a manner Gareth was quickly coming to recognize as a struggle for control.

“I promise to take it away at once, if you’ll at least accept my note.”

Faith stood silent, her expression unreadable.

“All right, then, you prefer the flowers,” said Gareth cheerfully, taking off his hat and thrusting it at O’Reilly, who accepted it without thinking.

“Oh, just give me the note,” said Faith irritably. “And give Lord Roth back his hat, O’Reilly.”

Grinning, Gareth handed her the envelope and took back his hat, while two of his footmen appeared as if by magic and began hauling the tree



away.

“Leave it,” snapped Faith as she opened the envelope. The footmen looked uncertainly at Gareth, who indicated they should leave with a subtle inclination of his head. They promptly disappeared.

Faith unfolded the note and began silently reading.

*My humblest apologies for the unintentional insult last night. May I take you driving to atone?*

Faith carefully refolded the note, replaced it in the envelope, and turned to O'Reilly. “My pelisse and a suitable hat, please,” she said sweetly. O'Reilly hastened off to find her maid, Becky. An awkward silence fell over the foyer. Gareth winked at Grace, who folded her lips in an attempt to control the urge to laugh. Faith stood quietly in place, a cool expression on her lovely face. When the footman returned with the requested items, she put them on, stepped around the tree, and placed her gloved hand on Gareth's arm. Without a word, they disappeared through the front door.

Grace exchanged glances with O'Reilly as soon as Wilson, the Huntwick butler, closed the door after them. “I'm glad you were able to find a suitable hat.” Her lips twitched.

“I was a bit worried, my lady. When I reached Miss Faith's chamber, I couldn't find Becky and I wasn't at all sure what would *be* suitable. I had to guess,” the footman responded, doing his best to look solemn.

Grace, who had almost regained her composure, began laughing helplessly. “Oh, my! What if you had guessed wrong?”

O'Reilly gave up all attempt at solemnity. “I'd have hidden behind the t-t-tree!” he choked out, wiping away tears of mirth.

When they'd recovered somewhat, O'Reilly hastened away to find someone to help him move the “tree.” Grace stood in the foyer another long moment, staring thoughtfully at the door, as if it could help her discover what was brewing between her sister and Gareth Lloyd.

All was quiet except the rumble of the wheels, the steady clip-clop of the horse's hooves and the ambient sounds of the city. Faith sat primly erect,

her hands folded in her lap, her face composed, staring straight ahead through the animal's ears.

After about ten minutes, they entered the park, and Gareth cleared his throat. "I don't suppose you could find it in your heart to allow me to apologize?"

Faith slowly turned her head and regarded his profile with a cool, appraising look. He didn't seem nearly uncomfortable enough yet, she decided, so she said nothing but did not look away.

Gareth gave her half a glance before returning his attention to the road. "I realize, of course, that my clumsy attempt at conversation was unforgivable..." His voice trailed off, and he was clearly hoping she would respond. When she didn't, his exasperation rose. "Have you heard a word I've said, Miss Ackerly?"

"I have," she replied.

Gareth raised his eyebrows. This was, by far, the strangest conversation he'd ever had with a woman. It had long been his experience that women seldom *stopped* talking, and never had he found it necessary to make an effort to drag a complete sentence out of one. "And have you nothing to say?" he asked patiently.

Faith looked back at him steadily. "When you've said something worthy of a response, I shall give you one."

At that unbelievable statement, Gareth abruptly lost his temper. "Do you realize, Miss Ackerly, that your behavior toward me has been nothing short of callous, disrespectful, and rude from before we even met until this very moment?"

Faith continued to sit in silence, so he went on. "The first contact I ever had with you was a short, terse note ordering me to remind Trevor Caldwell that his business reputation would suffer if it was shown he couldn't handle your sister. At the time, I thought it a brilliant piece of deductive reasoning—and, of course, it worked."

Faith finally stirred at this reminder of the role he'd played in almost ruining her sister's relationship before it even began. "Given the fact that it was your impetuous and ill-placed wager in White's betting book that nearly cost my sister the only man she's ever loved, I felt it necessary to help you bring them back together." She gave Gareth a smug, superior look.

The marquess's voice grew soft. If Faith had known him better, she'd have become immediately alarmed, for any of his family and close friends could have told her that his tone indicated his otherwise rather generous supply of patience was at an end. "And so, princess, in the hope that you'd forgiven me, as your sister and brother-in-law have, I spoke to you at their wedding reception. I'd hoped to tell you how impressed I was with your strategy, but my attempts at conversation were clumsy, and you left me no chance to make it up."

Faith raised her eyebrows. "The topic you broached that evening was neither suitable to me nor apparently relevant to the subject you say you wished to discuss, my lord."

Gareth ignored her words. His smile turned mocking as he expertly brought the vehicle around to exit the park and return to the Caldwell town house. "You can imagine how pleased I was, then, to find myself alone with you last night on that balcony. It was the perfect opportunity to impart to you what I'd meant to say all those months ago." His voice softened again, this time turning husky and deep. "I hadn't counted on your being so lovely in the moonlight, or on the wistful expression in your eyes when you heard that waltz."

Faith caught her breath and turned again to face him, but he wasn't looking at her anymore. His expression in rugged profile was hard as he looked out at the road before them, and his brown eyes weren't soft and warm any longer. They lapsed into silence.

Too soon, they pulled up in front of the Caldwell town house, and Faith felt a moment's remorse as Gareth jumped down and held a hand up to help her disembark the carriage. She placed her gloved hand lightly in his and stepped down, halting him briefly when he started to escort her up the steps.

"My lord, I didn't realize your intentions at my sister's wedding."

His face remained impassive, so she turned to walk up the steps, feeling helpless in the face of his withdrawal. He fell into pace beside her.

At the door she tried once more. "Lord Roth, I *do* accept your apology." She stopped awkwardly as Wilson opened the door.

Gareth tipped his hat then took a step back. "Never mind, Miss Ackerly. If you'll recall, you never gave me a chance to offer it." And with

that, he turned and strode down the steps, leaving a bemused Faith to step inside.

Wilson closed the door behind her.

## Six

**D**on't tell me you've come to appreciate that monstrosity!"

Faith smiled faintly as Grace appeared next to her with little Christian nestled on her shoulder. She was standing next to the tree Gareth had delivered, contemplating just how she could make up for the misunderstanding that had arisen between them. She'd decided she'd been more stubborn than the situation required, even if her assessment of his previous impropriety remained unchanged. "I can't say I like it, no. But I do appreciate the spirit in which it was given."

Grace peered at her sister's troubled face. "Let's go sit down," she suggested. "Christian's only a month old, but he grows quite heavy when I hold him for long periods of time."

They walked into the drawing room, and Grace settled into the rocking chair that seemed so out of place among the other delicate pieces of furniture scattered about. Despite her fears to the contrary, Grace had immediately fallen in love with motherhood and insisted upon caring for Christian almost exclusively. Her decision had prompted Trevor, who adored his spirited young wife, to place a sturdy rocker in all of the rooms that Grace frequented, including his study.

Faith sat down on a padded stool close to her sister's chair. "You know the marquess a great deal better than I do," she said.

Grace nodded. Gareth Lloyd was a close friend of her husband, and she'd grown quite fond of him, despite the incident during their courtship which had almost resulted in destroying Grace and Trevor's burgeoning relationship. She had long since forgiven him for placing a public bet in White's famous betting book that had nearly humiliated Trevor and destroyed Grace's reputation. The event was now something about which they frequently teased Gareth.

"I'm afraid I've offended him rather deeply. I was hoping to rectify that situation."

Grace smiled. She knew her sister well enough to hear what Faith wouldn't say aloud. "You'd prefer finding a way to do it without seeming supplicating and undignified, yes?"

Faith hesitated, then nodded.

"Do you mind if I inquire as to the circumstances?" Grace asked gently.

After a moment's hesitation and several halting starts, Faith recounted the tale from the beginning, starting with the letter she'd written to him the previous year, when he'd placed the ill-fated wager, the snub she'd delivered at Grace's wedding, and the way she'd reacted to his words while they danced on the balcony. She blushed a little as she described their stolen waltz, but knew she could tell her sister nearly anything.

"The worst part is," finished Faith miserably, "he tried several times to apologize to me during our drive, but I didn't let him."

Grace looked thoughtful. "It isn't at all like you to have such strong reactions." She smiled wryly. "After all, he didn't call you an ice princess *himself*, merely stated he found it hard to believe Society does so."

"That actually wasn't what really bothered me," Faith admitted, her face coloring a becoming shade of pink. She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "It was the way I let him hold me. I...I *wanted* him to, Grace. I even found myself wishing he would kiss me." She swallowed hard, fighting the strange knot of emotion that lodged in her midsection every time she considered her reaction to the unsettling marquess. "It isn't at all proper. It makes me feel all...achy."

Grace leaned back in her rocker and settled Christian in the crook of her arm, trying to hide the smile of satisfaction on her face. "Well, what's wrong with feeling achy?"

Faith fidgeted, entirely uncomfortable with the topics of feelings and kisses, even though it was Grace in whom she was confiding. "*Everything's* wrong with it. He's not my husband, my fiancé, or even my beau. I want to be with someone who loves me the way Trevor loves you." Her face softened. "His eyes go all warm when he sees you." Faith gave a brief tremulous smile, and her sister watched it fade. "Gareth's not that sort of man. And I shouldn't have such feelings about him."

Grace tilted her head, pondering all Faith hadn't said, and wondered if it was physical intimacy she feared. Gareth's reputation was that of a man

who did not hide his interest in fulfilling his physical needs, and she couldn't imagine he'd be different with someone about whom he cared. And with the marked attention the marquess was paying Faith, despite her every effort to discourage him, Grace was beginning to suspect he had a genuine interest in her sister, one that might even blossom into affection. "You know," she remarked, "Trevor touched me and made me feel achy long before we ended up together."

Faith fidgeted, confirming her sister's belief that she was uncomfortable with thoughts of physical affection. "But he wanted you from the very beginning. Honorably. You never had a reason to question that."

"No. But Trevor certainly had reason to question my feelings for *him*." Grace smiled. "Why don't you give Gareth a chance?"

"Because he's known as nothing but a disreputable rake with only the worst of intentions, no matter what Amanda Lloyd believes. People don't change. Not really. A leopard can't change its spots, you know."

Grace looked thoughtful. "I disagree. People can change. He hasn't been spoken of in connection with a woman, gently bred or otherwise, in over a year."

"Likely because he hasn't been in London in that long," interjected Faith dryly.

"In fact," continued Grace as though her sister had not spoken, "although I did not witness it, cooped up as I am here these days, I heard he turned a very cold shoulder to Evelyn Hedgepath when she practically threw herself at him in the middle of the dance floor."

Faith chewed on her lip. "Last night? At the ball I attended?"

Grace nodded. "According to Aunt Cleo." She gave Faith a pointed look. "Perhaps that's what made him seek out a quiet moment, away from all those opportunities to be a 'disreputable rake,' there on that balcony. A quiet moment with *you* that he enjoyed so much that he came here today. To see *you*."

Faith looked up. "I'd just like to set things right between us."

"Well, then," Grace pointed out, "tonight might be the perfect opportunity. Gareth is certain to be at Amanda's annual ball. I'm sure you'll be able to find a moment to apologize to him. He's really a very good-

natured person, you know. In fact, his temperament often reminds me of Trevor's."

"Who reminds you of me?"

The Earl of Huntwick stood in the doorway, a smile of possessive pride on his face as he looked at the child cuddled in his wife's arms.

"Gareth, my lord." Grace smiled, her face taking on the glow it always did when her husband was around.

He looked from his wife's smugly smiling face to Faith and saw her discomfort. "Does this have anything to do with that rather odd-looking tree in my foyer?" he asked, then was obliged to rescue his tiny son as his wife dissolved into irrepressible giggles.

Faith glared at her.

Trevor lifted the baby over his head and looked up into the child's angelic face, strolling in amusement out of the drawing room. "Perhaps we should warn Roth his life is about to be turned upside down," he suggested to the little bundle. Christian appeared agreeable.

Suddenly, Trevor recalled Gareth's role in his courtship of Grace. Grinning widely, he decided it would be far more entertaining to watch his friend learn everything on his own.

Hello, Faith!" called Cleo Egerton from within her carriage. "My, don't you look lovely? Do try to hurry, dear. I can already see the line of carriages backed up down the street!"

Faith and Grace leaned forward to look at the snarl of traffic. Grace stifled a giggle and asked her sister, "You don't suppose she'd be willing to leave her carriage here and walk the two blocks to Amanda's, do you?"

Faith gave a look of mock horror. "And arrive on foot? Scandalous! Maybe I can convince her to go on without me, and I shall wait until she's almost there. Then I can walk down and get into the carriage just in time to arrive at the door."

"Faith Marie, how long do you plan on just *standing* there?"

Faith rolled her eyes at the shrill voice of her aunt and obediently descended the steps.

"Remember what I told you," called Grace.



Faith waved without looking back and disappeared into the conveyance. Grace turned to go back into the town house but jumped, startled to find her husband standing behind her wearing a wide grin.

“My goodness, Trevor! Must you skulk around like that?”

He pulled her into his arms. “Aren’t you the least bit upset you’re going to miss all the excitement?”

Grace waved a hand in the air. “I have every confidence Faith will handle everything with her usual aplomb.”

Trevor raised an eyebrow. “Ah. But will Gareth?”

Grace shook her head. “There won’t be any excitement.” An impish gleam lit her blue eyes, and she stepped closer to Trevor, tilting her face up to his. “Unless you’re up to creating some here...”

Her husband gave her a wolfish leer, and the occupants of several carriages rolling past on their way to the Lloyds’ party later recounted their astonishment at seeing him sweep his wife, who was loudly shrieking with laughter, off her feet, kick open the door to their town house, and disappear inside. The older ladies of the ton frowned and clucked their tongues in disapproval at yet another example of outlandish behavior by the Countess of Huntwick, but the younger ladies sighed wistfully. They didn’t care that Grace was now a married mother who ought to behave with more decorum. They each hoped to find someone as dashing and romantic as her husband.

For most, their dreams now centered on the Marquess of Roth.

## Seven

Faith stood at the far end of the crowded ballroom, surreptitiously watching the top of the elaborate staircase for the Marquess of Roth to appear. She'd already turned down several requests to dance, pleading a slight headache so prettily that each rejected gentleman had promptly offered her some form of assistance. Several had disappeared to bring her refreshment, others to find different debutantes with whom to dance. A few of her most ardent admirers remained to talk quietly with her, however, so she was attempting to keep up the pretense of enjoying their conversation while not really listening.

Her distraction became evident to a couple of the more astute young gentlemen after she agreed to accompany young Lord Pinkerton when he raced his brand-new phaeton with Lord Ivanly, who'd just boasted that he'd never been beaten. It was a move most uncharacteristic of the very correct young lady. In fact, Pinkerton had just asked Faith whom she thought the better racer—a question that, without a doubt, could not have a correct answer. She was furiously trying to come up with the most diplomatic response when Gareth Lloyd finally stepped into view.

*"The Marquess of Roth!"* boomed the Seth butler. A hush, identical to the one from the previous evening, fell across the room. The men surrounding Faith frowned as they watched her face light up in reaction.

Gareth stood still at the top of the stairs for a long moment, his eyes skipping quickly over the crowd assembled below. Faith caught her breath. She'd been so angry with him earlier that afternoon and so concerned about them being discovered the evening before, she hadn't taken the time to really look at him. What she saw now quite simply took away her breath.

He was quite tall, of course, as she'd noticed when he first asked her to dance, but it wasn't just his height that made one stop and stare. Indeed, other men of her acquaintance were as tall or taller. Gareth, though, had a presence he'd lacked the year before, an aura of power and command that hadn't come from merely inheriting a title. It came from recognizing

responsibility and living up to expectations. Some men simply assumed a title. Gareth Lloyd had *become* the Marquess of Roth.

It was no wonder, she realized, that the group of girls on the terrace the previous evening had been so silly and flighty over him. He filled out his black evening jacket and trousers in a way that the false padding used by so many ton dandies did not. His face was tanned, unlike those of most of his peers, as though he spent much of his time outdoors. His planes were rugged without seeming harsh, making him almost unbearably handsome when he didn't smile, and boyishly charming when he did. But most of all, his incredible eyes left Faith feeling rather weak.

Even from this distance they were amazing. Set under thick, brooding eyebrows the same dark color as his hair, they were a warm shade of light brown that could twinkle and dance when he laughed, glitter ominously with dangerous intent when he was angry, or glow a warm chestnut when he smiled. She also knew they could soften with aching tenderness at times, just as they had the other night when they danced their private waltz. That look had made Faith feel as though she were the only woman in the world.

And now those eyes found hers.

She'd carefully watched and waited all night for this very instant, wanting to see him arrive so that she could choose her moment and approach him when he seemed the most relaxed and open to what she had to say. But when he began to descend the steps with deliberate intent, his eyes never left hers, compelling her to remain where she stood. Faith realized then that the moment would not be hers to choose.

Gareth reached the ballroom floor and began crossing the room with ground-eating strides, making his unerring way to where she stood in the midst of her admirers. As he strode toward her, hundreds of pairs of eyes followed his progress, all eager to be the first to see who or what had captured Gareth's attention.

Faith lost sight of him for a moment as someone blocked her view, but all too soon he reappeared, materializing in front of her as if from thin air. He flicked an impatient glance at the men standing around her. They instantly obeyed the unspoken command and moved aside, melting into the crowd that had suddenly found this corner of the ballroom fascinating.

And there he stood. Faith froze for a long moment, her eyes locked with his.

He bowed slightly. "Miss Ackerly." His tone was warm, held none of dipped coldness from the end of their afternoon drive.

She inclined her head regally and sank into a proper curtsy. "My lord," she murmured.

When she straightened, he held out his arm. Enveloped by a strange sense of unreality, Faith watched herself place a hand on it, allowed him to escort her to the dance floor, just as if he'd asked permission. Once there, she turned as if in a trance and stepped into his arms.

From around the room, curious looks and envious stares followed their progress, most wondering what had happened to cause this pairing. Very few people had observed their short drive in the park that afternoon, and nobody had witnessed their dance on the balcony. Nearly everyone began racking their memories, trying to recall if Faith and Gareth had ever even been properly introduced. Nobody found themselves able to recall such an occurrence, although with the friendship between the Lloyds and the Caldwells, it made sense, especially given her sister's marriage into one of the families. Still, they had never interacted publicly, and certainly never in a way that made them appear so attuned to one another. Yet here they were: Faith Ackerly, the ton's Incomparable Ice Princess, dancing with Gareth Lloyd, Society's Most Eligible. And they were staring into one another's eyes as if they were the only couple on the dance floor.

Amanda Lloyd, well used to the ton's typical overreactions, had largely ignored the crowd's response to the appearance of her brother-in-law. Now, however, as she turned away from the group of older ladies she was greeting, she began to realize something unusual was happening. Excited whispers were circulating through the room, rising in volume as they increased in number. Curious, she followed the stares of those nearest her to the dance floor. Her eyes widened. She watched a moment, grinned in satisfaction, and hurried to her husband's side.

"Jon!" she hissed excitedly. "Look at Gareth!"

Jonathon Lloyd excused himself and turned from his conversation to see what his wife was talking about, sure Gareth had done something to yet again upset his peace. To his surprise, he saw his brother waltzing silently around the ballroom, staring into the eyes of Faith Ackerly. He watched until the music ended, then nodded as if pleased.

“I hadn’t thought it would happen so soon,” he told Amanda. “But he couldn’t have made a better choice.”

As the music drew to a close, Gareth stopped dancing. He reluctantly released Faith, took a small step backward, and bowed slightly from the waist, his eyes never leaving hers.

When his arms fell away, Faith finally managed to shake off the spell that had held her from the moment Gareth appeared at the top of the stairs. Numb, she watched him bow, then automatically sank into a graceful curtsy, her mind spinning furiously. She realized she’d danced the entire waltz while gazing adoringly up into Gareth’s eyes at one of the largest events of the Season. And strangely, it wasn’t the fact that nearly seven hundred people had witnessed her behavior that bothered her. What upset her was that once again she’d been unable to control her reactions to the unsettling Marquess of Roth.

She rose from her curtsy and looked directly into his brown eyes, determined that this time they wouldn’t be her undoing. “Thank you, my lord,” she said in a deliberately cool voice. He quirked an eyebrow in amusement, as if he knew what a churning emotional mess she was on the inside. Still, he said nothing, merely offered an arm to escort her from the dance floor.

Faith strolled along beside him, her head held high, trying to ignore the curious stares being rudely directed at them. Grace had often been the center of such attention, had actually seemed to enjoy raising eyebrows and courting gossip, but Faith had always preferred to avoid it. She felt more dreadfully conspicuous than ever before. For the first time in her life, she felt extraordinarily tall, awkward and clumsy and gauche. The feeling made her more determined than ever to say what she had to say to Gareth so that they could clear the air. After that, she could avoid seeing him for the rest of the Season.

She slowed her steps so she could have a moment to speak to him before he returned her to the group of young men with whom she had been conversing. “My lord,” she said. “I’d hoped I might have a word with you tonight.”

Gareth matched her pace. “By all means, princess,” he replied in that deep resonant voice that sent chills down her spine. “What is it you wish to say?”

“Perhaps somewhere quieter,” she suggested, glancing around. “Where nobody will stare at us or try to overhear our conversation.”

Gareth half-smiled. “I believe the only balconies to be found in my brother’s home are connected to the bedchambers.”

Faith stiffened slightly at the teasing insinuation but bit back the sharp retort that rose to her lips. She forced herself to relax. “The garden, perhaps,” she suggested, her tone carefully level. “In twenty minutes?”

They reached Faith’s friends, and Gareth lifted her hand for a kiss. “That would be most acceptable, Miss Ackerly.” He nodded to the group of resentful young men and strode abruptly off.

Faith watched him go, thinking how very different he looked, here among all the other men in their brightly colored jackets, tight breeches, and heavily starched cravats twisted into impossibly intricate knots. Gareth seemed to prefer dark-hued jackets with long trousers instead of the more widely accepted breeches, and a softer, more simply tied neck cloth. It was a style of dress of which Faith found she reluctantly approved.

With a hidden sigh of resignation, she turned back to the group of young men and accepted several of the dances she had earlier declined, no longer able to justify her refusal after having danced with Gareth.

Gareth stepped neatly around a tall hedge to keep an eye on the doors that led from the ballroom without being seen himself. Faith had asked him to wait for twenty minutes, but he knew precisely what the crowd in the ballroom would think if he and Faith were to disappear at the same time so soon after their closely watched waltz. So, as a precaution, he made quite a show of leaving.

He knew a momentary spurt of annoyance when he encountered Evelyn Hedgepath in front of his brother’s town house, just arriving at the ball. Given the altercation from the other evening that had driven him to find solitude on the balcony, Evelyn was the last person he wanted to see.

“Good evening, my lady,” he said, left with no polite alternative.

“Good evening, my lord,” she returned, assaulting him with a dazzling smile that told him she forgave him for the public setdown on their last encounter. “Leaving so soon?”

Gareth nodded. "I have an early day planned. To that end, I hope you'll excuse me." He bowed slightly and touched a hand to his hat. "Enjoy the ball, Evelyn." He turned and finished descending the steps.

Evelyn watched as he gained the street, but frowned when he didn't move toward the line of coaches picking up and dropping off their aristocratic passengers. Instead, he strode down the walk and turned into the narrow alleyway between the Seth town house and the home next door. Bemused, Evelyn went inside.

Gareth circled around to the back of the town house and entered through the garden gate, making his way unerringly to a row of tall hedges near the terrace. He lit a cheroot and mentally ticked off the minutes that had passed since he'd left Faith in the ballroom.

Actually, he reflected after a moment's thought about the situation, he was rather surprised the correct-minded Miss Ackerly hadn't arrived at the same conclusion about the mind-set of the crowd that he had. It made him smile. The fact that she seemed bothered enough by his mere presence that she had actually lost sight of the conventions to which she so strongly adhered was encouraging indeed. Because he now knew without a doubt that he intended to have Faith Ackerly.

He inhaled deeply and paced back and forth behind the hedge a moment, contemplating the irrevocable direction his thoughts had taken. He couldn't put his finger on the exact moment marriage to Faith had come into his mind. It could have been when she'd first snubbed him at her sister's wedding. Or perhaps it had been just the other night, on the deserted balcony as they danced in the moonlight. But Gareth did know exactly when he'd realized that what he intended would become a fact, that his destiny was irrevocably linked with Faith's. It had been the moment he'd stepped into his brother's ballroom and looked across the floor to find that despite the rather cold ending to their afternoon drive, Faith had been watching for him.

His smile turned a bit grim. Arriving at his decision was the easy part. Now he had to find a way to convince Faith she was meant to be his, for he didn't entertain the foolish illusion that she would be in complete accord with his decision. It would definitely take a certain amount of finesse, a great deal of careful planning, and some very patient persuasion to make

Faith come to him of her own volition. Because he wanted her under no other circumstance.

He looked again at the terrace doors and estimated that fifteen minutes had passed. He watched the whirling couples through the bank of windows and thought of everything he'd always expected his eventual marriage to become. The marriage between his mother and father had been a beautiful union wholly based on love. He could remember back to when he was just a small boy, catching them whispering and cuddling in the hall or holding hands during dinner. When they'd died and Jonathon had inherited the title, he vowed that he would accept no less in his own marriage.

Of course, at that time he had been a mere second son with no title to pass on, and he'd assumed he would have all the time in the world to make his decision—time to allow love to find him. But then had come the unexpected inheritance with all its attached responsibilities, and reality had firmly intruded. He needed a marchioness to bring grace to his title, to preside over his estates, to act as his hostess...and to bear his children.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Faith quietly stepped out onto the terrace, her large gray eyes skipping almost nervously around the deserted space and reluctantly down the lighted pathway. Seeing no sign of Gareth, she turned and looked uncertainly back at the doors, wondering if he had decided not to show.

"I'm here, Faith." He stepped out from behind the hedge.

The uncertainty disappeared from her face so quickly that Gareth was not sure it had been there to begin with. She stepped right up to the edge of the terrace and looked down at him, nearly swallowed by shadows, dressed all in black and standing just off the lighted path. She said nothing, however, and Gareth found himself wondering if this was how Shakespeare's Romeo had felt as he stood beneath Juliet's balcony.

She looked so regally aloof that he mentally shook his head. Faith Ackerly would never behave with the impetuous spontaneity that had caused young Juliet Capulet to first fall in love with Romeo, then throw caution to the winds and secretly marry the sworn enemy of her family. Faith's passions and loyalties would be quieter, though no less deep, no less strong.

She broke the locked gaze that held them both and started down the terrace steps, her long elegant fingers delicately lifting the hem of her dress



so it wouldn't trail on the rough stone. She dropped it when she reached the cobbled path, and walked sedately to stand as close to Gareth as it would allow. She looked at him from her position of torchlit safety.

"There is a rumor circulating inside that you came tonight merely to dance one dance, and that you then left, my lord," she said. She stood between two of the torches placed at regular intervals along the pathway, their dancing glow turning her hair to shimmering gold.

"I did," he answered simply.

Faith felt an absurd burst of pleasure at the thought that he might have come just to dance with her.

His next words banished that brief spurt of happiness. "I'd have stayed longer, but you wished to speak with me privately, and I hoped to minimize any chance of causing your reputation harm. People might have correctly speculated that we disappeared together if we left at the same time."

Startled, Faith realized she had never even considered what others might think, which was unusual for her. Normally, she carefully considered all aspects of a situation before making a decision. Suddenly angry with herself, she gave him a curt nod in grudging deference to his superior logic.

"A prudent precaution, my lord. Thank you."

Gareth drew his eyebrows together, sensing she'd retreated within herself for some unknown cause. The expression in her large gray eyes remained inscrutable. Still, she had asked him to meet her, and he was more interested than ever in finding out what she had to say that was important enough to her that she would risk her pristine reputation to meet him alone.

"You wished to say something to me, Miss Ackerly?" he prodded gently.

Faith nodded and took a deep breath. Gareth stood quietly beside the boxwood hedge, patiently awaiting her reply. Now was the time for the prim speech of apology she had rehearsed all afternoon, the apology that would relieve her of the burden of knowing she'd behaved inappropriately toward him but would drive home the knowledge that she wished to have no further encounters. It was time, she knew, so why did she feel this fleeting instant of sorrow, this odd twinge of regret that they would never dance again? She hesitated.

At that second, the doors to the ballroom opened, allowing music, conversation, laughter, and light to spill out into the garden. Faith gave

Gareth a stricken look, then turned her head to see who was coming outside.

Gareth didn't stop to think. In the blink of an eye, he stepped from behind the hedge and grasped Faith's arm with one hand, clamping the other hand over her mouth. He yanked her off the path and behind the hedge, out of sight of the people who were coming out onto the terrace.

The move startled a small shriek from Faith, a sound muffled by Gareth's hand. Once he had her safely out of sight, Gareth held her close, his hand still over her mouth, his other arm now wrapped securely around her midsection. She'd never felt so safely cocooned—or so infuriatingly imprisoned.

Gareth peered around the side of the hedge and saw his sister-in-law talking with a small group of ladies who had apparently decided that they needed some air. He straightened and looked down at the still figure he held in his arms. The gray eyes looking back from over his hand were coldly furious, but she held still. Her very stillness was at such odds with the murderous expression in her eyes that Gareth felt his mouth quirk in an unbidden smile.

Faith saw the amusement cross Gareth's face. In an instant, she felt her anger go from restrained indignation to white-hot ire. Without thinking, she reverted to pure instinct. She kicked him in the shin.

The slippers she wore were delicate affairs meant only for dancing, and thus lacked anything resembling strength or substance. They were definitely not constructed for kicking, but the resulting sharp ache in her foot was well worth the satisfaction of watching the smile fade from his face and hearing him stifle a grunt of sudden pain. His eyebrows snapped together as he looked at Faith again, noting that this time her expression was one of smug satisfaction.

"What the bloody hell did you do that for?" he hissed.

She didn't answer. Gareth belatedly realized that he still held his hand over her mouth. He released her, no longer caring if she was set on ruining her own reputation by screaming at him or by walking away to be discovered by the ladies on the terrace.

Faith took a small step away from him but wisely remained out of sight of the house. "You held me too closely," she spat back in a low voice. She drew herself up primly. "It isn't proper."

The steady murmur of the women talking on the terrace continued, and Gareth jerked his head back toward the sound. “Did you want them to see you?”

Faith’s ire faded. “No,” she admitted in a whisper.

Gareth’s anger ebbed, too, as he looked at Faith, who was now fidgeting, a girlish look of guilt on her lovely face.

Amanda’s voice came floating over the call hedge. “Would you like to take a stroll through the gardens?” The voices with her grew louder, a couple of them declining, but at least one agreeing to the evening walk. Sudden panic replaced the look of guilt on Faith’s face.

Gareth momentarily considered pressing Faith up against the hedge, hoping none of the women would look toward them when they passed on the path. That hope immediately died when he looked at Faith again. Her white dress reflected the light from the torches and would stand out like a beacon, as would her golden hair. Faith apparently reached the same conclusion, for she put out her hand and gave him a beseeching look.

He grasped the hand she offered and looked down at her. Silently willing her to trust him, he tugged on her arm and led her away from the path and into the darkness.

## Eight

Faith felt a dreamlike sense of unreality surround her as she followed Gareth into the gardens. She had been here many times with Amanda, of course, who had a real fondness for all things growing, the result of which was a lovingly tended paradise many times larger than the gardens of most towns. So, because she was mostly familiar with the layout, she knew precisely where Gareth was heading. He was making for the hedge maze.

Odd, how mazes were a fixture of many English gardens. Her aunt had one, Grace had one, and so did most of her friends in town. None, however, were as elaborate or as complex as Amanda Lloyd's. Faith had never been inside. Nonetheless, she was instantly transported back in time, running through that overgrown maze of her childhood, unable to find an exit. Scenes from those hours flashed through her mind.

*The shadows of the hedges stretching toward her as darkness began falling.*

*Every sound she could not explain renewing her fears that a monstrous spider would come.*

*Duncan's cruel mouth clamped on the servant girl's breast while she writhed beneath him.*

Faith's eyes widened, and her breathing quickened as Gareth pulled her inexorably closer to Amanda's garden maze. She looked with deepening trepidation at the dark entrance and knew she couldn't go inside, especially at night.

She planted her feet and abruptly stopped walking. "I won't go in there," she whispered.

Gareth looked back in surprise. "Why not?" he asked.

Now *that* was a very good question, thought Faith, wondering what he would think if she told him the truth. She bit back a wayward giggle as she imagined the look on his face when she told him she couldn't go in because she was certain they were in grave danger of being devoured by an

enormous arachnid. But as he was still looking at her, her hysterical mirth faded.

“I just won’t,” she said, her chin set stubbornly.

Gareth looked exasperated. He incorrectly assumed she was refusing as part of some sense of misplaced propriety. He hastened to reassure her. “Look, princess, I give you my word as a gentleman that I won’t ravish you inside that maze.

Still Faith stalled. “I’ve been gone from the ball for so long. Surely Aunt Cleo will worry. What if we were to get lost?”

“That won’t happen,” he assured her. “I grew up spending each Season in this house, and I know the maze well. I even helped Amanda expand it when she married Jon. We’ll simply come out on the side of the house, completely out of sight of the terrace, at which point I can deposit you quite safely back inside, no one the wiser and none the worse for wear.”

Faith bit her lip uncertainly. “You promise we won’t be in there long?”

Gareth shook his head and tugged insistently on her hand. That bit of prodding, combined with the voices of Amanda and her companions drawing closer, decided it for her. She took a deep breath and allowed herself to be pulled into the maze.

It was much darker inside than she’d thought it would be. The light from the torch-lit paths couldn’t completely penetrate the thick hedge walls, especially when she and Gareth left the outer paths to work their way inward. The marquess’s dark clothes made it nearly impossible for her to see him, so she was silently grateful that he held her hand so securely.

He began making a series of turns through the maze, and Faith tried to keep count in her head of the lefts and the rights, but with each turn that carried them farther from the entrance she could feel the old panic building in the pit of her stomach. Her knees began trembling, so she tried to focus on making her feet follow Gareth’s, but her ears were beginning to ring, too. She found she couldn’t concentrate.

*How much farther*, she wondered desperately, trying to control her breathing so Gareth wouldn’t know how agitated she was becoming. He had said that it would only be a short time before they came out, she reminded herself.

And then she stumbled.

Her hand slipped from Gareth's grasp just as he turned another corner. Instantly, the threatening gray fog descended. "Don't let go!" she cried out, and knelt and pressed both hands to her ears, waiting for the encroaching blackness to replace the enveloping mist as she fainted. Just before she lost consciousness, Faith felt herself being lifted and carried. With a thankful sob, she wrapped her arms around Gareth's neck and pressed her face into his dark jacket.

## Nine

Gareth carried Faith the short distance out of the maze. She felt him climb a small flight of steps, then sit down and settle her across his lap. She was beginning to feel a bit better, although she still trembled from head to toe. Her ears had stopped ringing, and she found she could breathe normally. Still, acutely embarrassed by what had just happened, she didn't raise her head from his shoulder.

"Faith?"

She didn't move.

"Faith, why didn't you just tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Her voice was muffled by his shoulder.

"That it wasn't me you feared." His voice was patient and tender, and Faith felt a ribbon of warmth unfurl in the pit of her stomach. He stroked her hair. "It was the maze that had you frightened, wasn't it, princess?"

She sat up and tried to move away from him, but he held her tightly. Her arms were still shaking much too hard for her to put much effort into insisting, so she shrugged. "It's too silly," she said, looking away.

He turned her chin back so she faced him, and laid a finger across her lips. "One's fears are never silly," he chided gently. "Why does the maze affect you so?"

She shuddered slightly. "If I needed to get out quickly, I couldn't," she said in a halting voice. She felt ridiculous, but his smile was encouraging, and she'd never told anybody how she felt before, hadn't spoken of her experience as a child since it had occurred. "It happens whenever I'm closed in somewhere and unsure of the way out." Her eyes turned distant, and a vision of Duncan, his mouth locked on that chambermaid's breast, danced through her mind. She shuddered again.

"I've known grown men who didn't like small places."

She shook her head. "It isn't small places," she corrected. "It's places from which I cannot escape."

"How long have you felt this way?" he asked.

She pulled away. "As long as I can remember," she murmured evasively, knowing it hadn't been just the maze. Duncan's sneering face danced in and out of her head again, and she wriggled off Gareth's lap to the bench beside him. "I'm fine now," she added.

She looked around, realizing for the first time that they were in a small white gazebo that opened on four of its eight sides. The closed walls were lined with benches, and it was on one of these that they were seated. "Where are we?"

"On the side of the town house," Gareth answered. "Amanda is expanding the gardens again to make a play area for little Geoffrey, but this part isn't finished." He smiled wryly. "I don't think my brother is aware he will be hosting yet another party this Season. I'm sure Amanda will want to show off this newest part of the most beautiful gardens in London."

Faith managed a small smile. Gareth decided it was time for her to tell him why she'd wanted to talk to him in the first place. She was rapidly regaining her composure. With it would return a large measure of the wariness she typically evidenced when dealing with him.

He stood, took a few steps away from the bench, and turned to smile disarmingly at her. "I don't mean to change the subject, but you did wish to speak with me privately, didn't you?" He leaned a shoulder negligently against a post and looked down at her with a steady gaze.

Faith felt a bit disadvantaged with him standing over her like that, but didn't quite trust her legs to hold her up yet. She cleared her throat and started to speak, but lost her voice when she saw him cross his powerful arms, remembering how she'd told Grace she wished he would kiss her. An unbidden vision of how easily those arms had held her when he'd carried her out of the maze only moments earlier went through her mind. She blushed, her face hot with embarrassment. It quickly changed to fury when she saw a knowing grin sweep across Gareth's face, as if he knew precisely what she was thinking.

Before she could stop herself, she leapt to her feet and crossed the gazebo. Her hand flashed out almost of its own accord and soundly slapped his cheek. Satisfaction spread warmly through her as she watched his smile begin to fade, and she slapped him again, then dropped her hand. She deliberately ignored the feeling of shamed horror rapidly spreading through her, concentrating instead on the intense anger.



“It galls me to think, my lord,” she hissed through clenched teeth, “that the only reason I’m standing here with you tonight is because I’d intended to apologize to you.”

Gareth slowly rubbed his cheek. “I take it, then, that you’ve changed your mind,” he remarked, his eyes narrowing on her pallid face.

Faith was growing increasingly distressed by what she’d done. She quaked inwardly at the quiet menace in his voice, but gamely stood her ground. “I have, my lord, and I would appreciate it if we were to have no further encounters.”

She turned to leave, intending to walk away with quiet dignity, but Gareth’s hand shot out and closed around her forearm. “Not so fast, Miss Ackerly.”

Faith tried to pull her arm away. “Let go of me,” she hissed.

Gareth ignored her. “It seems as though you and I are forever *not* apologizing to one another.”

Faith stopped trying to pull her arm from his grasp and instead stood still, glaring up into his taut, angry face. “Only because you’ve been so impossibly boorish that you’ve provoked me into behaving in ways I normally wouldn’t.”

“Is that why you slapped me?” he taunted, still holding her arm.

Faith’s gray eyes sparked. “I slapped you because...because...” She stopped, unable to come up with a reason that sounded more plausible than the truth.

Gareth stepped closer. With an involuntary cry of shock, Faith found herself tugged against his body. She looked up at him helplessly, her heart pounding nearly as hard as it had in the maze.

“If you haven’t a reason,” he said softly, “then perhaps I should give you one.” And his mouth claimed hers with a swift urgency that caught Faith completely off guard.

Shocked into inaction, she stood within his embrace, letting him kiss her, feeling his lips move over hers with insistence at first, and then with sudden melting tenderness. Something white-hot unfurled inside Faith, demanding a response, insisting she return the kiss. She fought it for a moment, but gave up and melted against him with a helpless little whimper. His mouth gentled on hers as her hands clutched at his jacket, then slid

inside and around his waist for support. She opened her mouth a bit, instinctively following his lead.

Gareth held his breath and tentatively ran his tongue lightly around her parted lips, reveling in the feeling of her body crushed against his, unable to believe the awakening response she stirred in him. When she shyly imitated the way he'd used his tongue on her, Gareth came apart.

With one arm, he pulled her closer still, his other hand sliding up her back to bury itself in her golden hair. With gentle insistence, he tilted her head back, lifting her face to his and deepening the kiss. His tongue plunged more deeply into her mouth, and still she responded. Gareth suddenly realized she was duplicating everything he did to her, not understanding, in her innocence, that she was only fueling a fire he should never have ignited.

With a groan, he tore his mouth from hers and gently pulled her head to his chest, staring into the darkness in an effort to bring his raging need back under control. He took a deep breath, silently commanding his heart to cease its pounding. When he could trust himself to speak, he said, "Now, princess. Now I think I deserve that slap."

Faith didn't respond, but Gareth felt a shudder go through her body. Her slim shoulders began shaking.

Alarmed, Gareth pulled back, trying to get her to look up at him, silently cursing himself for pushing a young lady of her innocent breeding too far. When she refused to look up, he reached down and tipped up her chin. "Faith, I'm so sor—," he began, then stopped abruptly.

Faith's eyes were shining, her face was flushed, and her shoulders were still shaking...but with laughter, not with tears.

"What do you find so funny?" His tone was slightly indignant, but his lips twitched, betraying his attempt to suppress the urge to laugh along with her.

Faith stopped laughing and bit her lip, though her eyes still danced with gentle humor. "I was just thinking," she responded a bit shyly, "that if your intention was to punish me with that kiss, I only got half of what I deserved." Gareth caught his breath as the merriment faded from her face and she took a step forward to look up at him, her eyes glowing with unabashed tenderness. "You see, my lord," she explained in an aching voice, "I actually slapped you *twice*."

His heart slammed into his ribs as he looked down at her angelic face. He found himself torn between shouting with laughter and kissing her again. It was really not a difficult decision. He gathered her into his arms for a kiss intended to right all the wrongs between them, a kiss that would allow them to begin anew...a kiss that never happened.

Over Faith's shoulder Gareth saw his sister-in-law, frozen in shock, standing on the path that led from the maze. Beside her stood Evelyn Hedgepath, his former lover, unquestionably the most vicious gossip in London. And the look of outraged shock on her face was quickly changing to one of malicious glee.

## Ten

Gareth gently pushed the bewildered Faith away from him and stepped around to block her from view with his body in the futile hope that Evelyn hadn't recognized her. The stunning thirty-six-year-old widow quickly dashed that hope.

"Faith Ackerly," she said, her voice laced with shrill outrage. "Does your aunt have any idea where you are?"

Gareth felt Faith stiffen in shock. "Evelyn," he said quickly, before Faith could respond. "Things aren't quite what they seem."

"Yes," piped up Amanda, hoping to help. "Perhaps Miss Ackerly became frightened by something she heard. It *is* rather dark in this section of the garden," she added. But as soon as the words passed her lips, she wished she could take them back. She'd inadvertently made it sound as though Faith and Gareth had deliberately chosen a quiet, shadowy place to meet.

Evelyn looked at both Gareth and Amanda as if they were daft. "Don't tell me I didn't see what was right before me."

Faith stepped from behind Gareth, a shuttered, icy expression on her features. "I'm perfectly certain, my lady, that you know precisely what you saw," she said in a cool tone. "And I don't suppose we could prevail upon you to keep it to yourself, could we?"

Evelyn drew herself up. "Miss Ackerly, are you insinuating that I would spread word of this around, that I would gossip like someone of coarse, common breeding?"

Faith paled a bit but remained composed. She shook her head. "I only hoped we could arrive at an understanding, my lady," she said.

Evelyn looked from Faith's blanched face to Gareth's impassive one. He stood slightly behind Faith, his stance strong and protective. Her lips compressed when she realized her former lover intended to stand up for Faith, when he'd never even acknowledged their relationship in public.

She stared at Faith and smiled with venomous sweetness. “Now, my dear. I hope you didn’t really believe I would spread vicious tales about you.” She managed a hurt look. “You didn’t, did you?” When Faith opened her mouth to answer, Evelyn cut her off. “You can stop worrying your pretty little head about it, because I shan’t tell a soul.”

Faith held her breath a second, then slowly let it out, hoping her deep relief didn’t show on her face. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but this wasn’t it.

Evelyn watched Faith’s shoulders lower slightly as her unease lessened. She lifted a hand, negligently studying her nails as she delivered her coup de grâce. “Of course,” she added in a sham apologetic voice, “I do feel duty bound to inform your aunt of the circumstances in which I found you.”

Gareth felt Faith flinch as if she’d been struck. He reached for her hand, but she evaded his touch. Worried, he looked down at her face and sucked in his breath. Faith was standing perfectly still, staring at Evelyn with no expression at all. It was as though she’d been carved of stone.

Except for her eyes. Faith’s eyes were like two shards of glittering gray glass—sharp, assessing, and dangerous. She stood quietly, waiting for Evelyn to look up from her nails.

When she heard nothing from the other three people in the garden, Evelyn smiled to herself in smug satisfaction and lowered her hand. She glanced first at Amanda and then at Gareth, expecting to see expressions of loathing and censure, but they weren’t looking at her at all. She followed their gazes until her eyes collided with Faith’s.

“If you feel you must speak with Aunt Cleo,” Faith said quietly, “then by all means you must do so, Lady Blakely.” She took a step down from the gazebo, her eyes never leaving Evelyn’s. “I completely understand, of course.”

The older woman sensed danger. She paled and took an involuntary step back. Faith stopped where she was, but continued to pin Evelyn in place with her eyes. Evelyn looked wildly from Gareth to Amanda and back again, then visibly regained her composure. She stepped toward Faith again and hissed, “How dare you threaten me, young lady!”

Faith raised her brow in pointed disdain. She watched impassively as Evelyn turned and hurried off down the path.

Amanda lifted her hands in a helpless shrug. "I'm so sorry, Faith," she said. She watched the indignant Evelyn's retreating back. "I suppose she could get lost in the maze," she added hopefully. Then she hurried after the older lady to try her best to avert the impending disaster.

Faith stood still on the second step of the gazebo, watching Amanda and Evelyn disappear into the darkness. Gareth stepped forward and put a hand lightly on her shoulder, wincing inwardly at how stiff she held herself. "Perhaps she'll keep her word and speak only to your aunt. Lady Egerton will know better than to say anything."

"She'll keep her word," Faith agreed in an even tone.

Gareth had his doubts. "You're sure?" he asked dubiously.

Faith nodded. "As sure as I am that she'll tell Aunt Cleo when there are at least a dozen people near enough to overhear."

Gareth's heart constricted at the flatness in her voice, but he said nothing, knowing he could offer Faith no comfort. She'd already retreated within herself in that odd way she had. He knew that for the rest of the evening, no matter what happened, Faith would manage to hold herself apart from it. Aloof. Cold.

Alone.

"Is there another way into the house from here?"

Gareth looked down at her. "Of course," he said, coming down the steps and automatically offering his arm. He dropped it awkwardly when she made no move to take it. "Follow me."

He led her around a stand of yew trees to the door of a greenhouse recently added to the side of the main building. Their footsteps were loud on the slate floor as they walked through the rows of potted plants filling the tables in the humid room. When they reached the door, which opened into a storeroom, Faith stepped past Gareth.

"Thank you, my lord, for showing me the way." She reached for the handle.

"Wait, please," said Gareth.

Faith hesitated. She turned to look at him, waiting politely for him to say what was on his mind.

"Let me go with you," he suggested. "I could help you," he added, then stopped awkwardly.

Faith gave him a small smile. “And give credence to the rumors which are no doubt already beginning to circulate?” She shook her head. “No, thank you, my lord.”

She opened the door and stepped into the darkened storeroom. Gareth leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb, watching grimly as Faith gingerly made her way through the darkness to the door that led to the servants’ hallway. She opened it and stopped for a moment, her slim form perfectly silhouetted in the light from the corridor. Almost as though she were giving herself a private little lecture of encouragement, he saw her straighten her shoulders and lift her chin before she stepped out and closed the door behind her.

Gareth closed his eyes and waited for a few seconds, almost hoping her courage would fail her, that she’d rush back to cry in his arms. After a moment he shook his head and smiled grimly; it was selfish of him to want the sense of relief that would come from the simple act of comforting her.

He looked once again at the still-closed door and turned and left the greenhouse, striding angrily through the garden and out the gate to the small alleyway that ran between his brother’s house and the one next door. Moving briskly, he gained the busy street in front of the town house. It was teeming with carriages coming and going in an endless stream, dropping off and picking up their noble passengers.

Grimacing at the expected shouts of greeting from acquaintances in the crowd, Gareth ignored everyone and impatiently shouldered his way to the front of the line of people waiting to enter the town house. Once he made it inside, he brushed off the footman who reached for his cape, removed it himself, and almost sprinted up the stairs to the second-floor ballroom entrance.

Twice as he passed, he heard Faith’s name mentioned by people leaving the party and knew that not only had Evelyn Hedgepath’s destruction already been wreaked here, in his brother’s home, but that the story was well on its way to being spread at other ton functions, where it would do still more damage.

Gareth finally reached the top step, scowling as he mentally cursed Society. They would assign no blame to a person of his rank and gender, but would cheerfully demolish the reputation of an innocent young woman like Faith.

“Don’t announce me, Preston,” he commanded the butler in a low tone. The older man nodded, bowing as Gareth moved past him to stand quietly in the doorway looking out over the crowd below.

He spotted Faith almost at once. She stood near the dance floor next to her aunt, the area immediately around them—normally populated with Faith’s many admirers—conspicuously empty. Her lovely face was as composed as ever, although even from this distance Gareth could see signs of incredible tension. The set of her shoulders spoke volumes, and it was evident she was making a valiant attempt to act as naturally as possible. But the way she appeared to be looking just above people’s eyes, as though she couldn’t bear to meet them and see the utter condemnation she knew would be there, made Gareth’s fists clench convulsively at his sides.

He watched her for another moment, his heart swelling with pride at the way she was handling the stress, then glanced at the tall figure of Cleo Egerton next to her. To his astonishment, she was grinning up at him in unabashed glee.

Puzzled, he started down the stairs, wondering if the old woman had finally completely lost her mind. He looked around as he neared the bottom of the staircase and caught Amanda’s eye, watching as her mouth formed an O of surprise. She turned away and began pushing her way through the crowd. He followed her with his eyes, saw her reach Jonathon’s side and pull him down to whisper something in his ear.

Immediately, the Earl of Seth’s face turned hard. He looked directly at Gareth with cold displeasure, and for the first time ever, Gareth knew he deserved his older brother’s censure. Filled with regret, he turned away.

Very deliberately, he directed his most charming smile at the first young lady he encountered, resolutely pushing Jonathon and the reckoning that was sure to come to the back of his mind. He bowed gallantly to a glowering old dowager. She sent him a speaking look and whisked her granddaughter away. Undaunted, he complimented a very plain young lady on her even plainer attire, making her blush furiously with pleasure. And through it all, he waited for somebody to bring up the subject of Faith—for he knew that he could not. If he were to so much as mention her name before somebody else did, he would be effectively driving the final nail into the coffin of her reputation.



At precisely that moment, Amanda magically appeared at his side and slipped her arm through his. "Gareth," she said in a delighted voice. "I'm so glad you decided to return! Did you give my love to Grace before you spoke with Lord Huntwick?"

Gareth smiled, realizing Amanda was trying to create an explanation for his prolonged absence and subsequent return. He gave her a grateful look. "I'm sorry Amanda, but Lady Huntwick wasn't about. I did pass along your message, however, through Hunt."

Already, several people around them were looking a little confused, but Gareth knew it would take very little for their minds to return to the more sordid and unfortunately more truthful version of the story. Amanda was, however, effectively planting a seed of doubt in some minds, and that was the beginning he sought. He and his sister-in-law walked slowly along for a few feet, pretending not to notice their transfixed audience.

"Well," Amanda cheerfully continued, "I suppose I'll just have to pay her a visit tomorrow." She stopped for a moment to greet a passing friend and turned back to Gareth with a bright, determined smile. "It is good that you are here, though, because Jonathon and I have decided that we simply cannot keep your little secret any longer."

At that mysterious statement, the people in their immediate vicinity gave up any pretense of conducting other conversations and actually leaned in to listen more closely.

Gareth raised his eyebrows. "Whatever are you up to now, Amanda Lloyd?" He shook his head with a resigned chuckle.

She reached up and covered his mouth with her hand. "Oh, no you don't, little brother!" She shook a finger at him. "And don't you dare pretend you don't know what I mean. You just promise me you won't go running off again until I say you can."

Gareth waited for her to remove her hand. When she didn't, he shrugged and gave her an exaggerated nod of assent. Amanda searched his eyes, then nodded as if satisfied and walked away.

The group of people who had been listening craned their necks to see which way she would go. When she walked directly to her husband and made no move to go to anybody else, they promptly scattered, anxious to spread word of the new and interesting on-dit they'd just overheard.

Gareth, too, watched Amanda walk away, confident that whatever scheme she'd concocted in her clever little mind was destined to save Faith's formerly immaculate reputation.

It occurred to him that Faith probably had even less knowledge of what was about to happen than he did. With a growing sense of alarm, Gareth looked at the spot near the dance floor where he'd last seen Faith and her aunt. They were no longer there.

He began walking around the room, glancing casually around in the hope of spotting Faith. Not that he had any idea what he would do when he found her, he realized, nodding and smiling briefly at an acquaintance passing nearby. He stopped once more and let his eyes scan the room.

"If you're looking for my niece, you'll see that she's standing a bit impatiently at the foot of the stairs, waiting for me to join her so she can leave."

Gareth turned to look down at the smugly smiling older lady. Lady Egerton was leaning on her ever-present ebony cane, a walking aid Gareth had long privately suspected she didn't really need.

"Why do I have the feeling, Lady Egerton, that you have no intention of allowing your niece to leave just yet?"

She jabbed him in the chest with a finger. "You're a lot brighter than you look, Roth." She shook her head. "I won't let her leave until we've fixed this mess the two of you have gotten yourselves into." She looked as pleased as punch, despite her harsh words.

"Why is it that you're not angry with me, my lady?"

Cleo raised her brows. "Why? Because it would be a complete waste of my time, of course. You don't really regret what happened tonight, but Faith certainly does. And I'm reasonably sure she'll make quite certain you'll come to wish you'd never laid a finger on her." Her bright blue eyes twinkled at him. "I'm merely going to sit back and enjoy the show." She broke off and glanced across the room to see Jonathon Lloyd making his way across the raised dais upon which the orchestra was arranged. She grabbed his arm urgently and pointed Gareth toward the stairs. "Go now and stand by Faith. She'll be needing you in just a moment."

Gareth looked down at her for a second longer and walked away, pushing through the crowd as the music came to a sudden discordant halt and the dancing couples looked around in surprise. He spotted Faith about

twenty yards away and headed toward her just as Jonathon raised his voice and the noise of the crowd died down.

Faith looked up at Jonathon curiously, wondering what he could possibly be doing, but grateful the attention of the guests was no longer so focused on her. She looked around for her aunt, thinking now would be the perfect time to slip away unnoticed. What she saw instead was Gareth heading straight for her.

Her lips thinned and her heart began pounding in sudden panic. She tried to warn him away with her eyes, but still he came, skillfully stepping around people who stood in his way. She looked in another direction and shook her head in resignation, then resolutely decided to act as if he weren't there. Pointedly, she turned her back and lifted her chin, focusing her attention on Jonathon, who had begun speaking.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have a rather unexpected announcement to make this evening. Those of you who know me best know that I seldom enjoy standing in front of a crowd making a scene. That's more my wife's way." A wave of laughter swept the room, for Amanda Lloyd had always been the life of any party, in direct contrast to her more taciturn husband. "However, she has asked me to do this tonight, and as I'm seldom able to refuse her anything, here I stand before you.

"Earlier this evening, an agreement was reached during a family meeting that will soon become known all over England. Some will be surprised by this agreement, some will be disappointed, and some, myself included, will be deeply relieved. The agreement to which I refer will be published in all the papers tomorrow, but since most of our close friends are in attendance tonight, we thought we'd just let you be the first to know."

Jonathon paused a moment for effect, then turned and looked deliberately at the foot of the ballroom steps where Faith stood wondering at his meaning. She felt Gareth arrive at her side just then and fervently wished he hadn't, because now people were turning to see whom the Earl of Seth was regarding. They would all see Gareth standing next to her and would begin discussing the scandal afresh.

With grim determination, she ignored the man at her side and stared fixedly at the dais, watching as Amanda joined her husband. Aunt Cleo appeared out of nowhere to take her arm on the side opposite Gareth.

As soon as he saw that all the players were in place, Jonathon glanced down at Amanda, took her hand, and began speaking again. “Friends, I’d like to formally announce the engagement of my younger brother Gareth, the Marquess of Roth.”

A great gasp went up from the crowd, and Faith stiffened in sudden shock. Who was the cad going to wed? And why in the world had he been kissing *her* the night his engagement was to be announced?

The Earl of Seth hesitated no longer in providing that information. “He is going to marry Miss Faith Ackerly.”

## Eleven

To Faith, it all seemed to happen slowly. Almost as one body the crowd turned, stared at them, and began applauding. She could see their moving hands and lips, but the sounds of clapping and the words of enthusiastic congratulations were coming to her as if from far away. Numbly she felt a smile arrange itself on her face, years of correct upbringing coming to her rescue.

She felt herself being enfolded in a warm hug from Aunt Cleo, who stood on tiptoe and whispered, "You're doing quite well, my dear, but please *do* try to stop looking so much like a wounded deer."

Faith felt herself nod in agreement. She turned to look up at Gareth, who was keeping up his part of the charade by smiling down at her in a tender and proprietary way. She watched his lips move and heard him say, "Shall we dance, princess?" But she couldn't answer, could only nod in response.

As if in a trance, she placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor, the other guests still applauding wildly as they moved aside to open an aisle through which the couple might walk. Faith felt herself nodding and smiling back at them from long-ingrained habit, but still the only thing that anchored her in reality was her hand on Gareth's arm and the warmth of his hand covering hers.

Faith and Gareth neared the dance floor, and Jonathon signaled the conductor to begin a waltz. Gareth turned to Faith and bowed. She sank into a graceful curtsy. And then, all at once, she was whirled away, spun breathlessly round and round the dance floor just as she had been that first night on the balcony.

Amanda watched the pair dance for a few moments, then nudged Jonathon, her face wreathed in a happy, relieved smile. "That went well, I think." She inclined her head toward the dance floor. "You wouldn't care to join them, would you?"

He didn't answer, but jumped down from the dais, caught her hands in his, and pulled her down after him. "Only if you think we can show them a *proper* waltz," he said. Laughing as they spun away, Amanda agreed to do just that.

Not everyone was as pleased. On the edge of the room, her face pale with fury, Evelyn Hedgepath watched the newly engaged couple with venomous eyes. She was so wrapped up in her anger, she didn't even notice when Cleo Egerton appeared beside her. "They do make a rather lovely couple, don't you think, Evelyn?"

The younger widow barely managed to stifle a sharp retort. She said in a tight voice, "Why yes, Lady Egerton. They do, at that. Had I known the situation, I wouldn't have felt such a need to—"

Cleo cut her off. "Bah! You knew precisely what you were doing. As it stands, you've forced something that should have—and I believe would have—developed naturally to progress with unhealthy haste."

Evelyn drew herself up indignantly. "I have no idea what you mean, my lady."

"Then perhaps I can make it clear, so that we each have an understanding of one another. You dumped Gareth because he had no evident hope of being anything more than a second son, and you hopped in bed with that pea brain Grimsby, who possessed the one thing Gareth did not: a title that outstripped the one held by your dead husband. Now, to your dismay, Gareth has not only inherited a title but outranks your new lover—whom you summarily dropped to publicly and shamefully chase once again after Gareth."

"I don't have to listen to this."

Cleo thumped her cane with angry impatience. "No, but I'll offer some advice to which you might consider listening. I suggest a long rest in the country, Evelyn. Your antics have been tolerated to this point because they are, sadly, all too common within our social set. However, you crossed the line this evening. This family *will* close ranks to protect its own. You'd never be received into a decent drawing room or be invited to any ball of importance again."

Evelyn stared into the sharp blue eyes of the dowager for a long moment before her own gaze skittered away and fell, once again, upon the dance floor, now shared by a number of waltzing couples. She thinned her

lips, inclined her head slightly in Cleo's direction, and gathered her skirts in one hand. "Good night, Lady Egerton," she said, her tone even.

"Good night, Evelyn." Cleo turned away, dismissing the younger woman, and resumed watching her niece and soon-to-be nephew-in-law.

As the dance floor filled up around them, Faith began to relax. She looked up at Gareth with a smile, but her heart remained troubled. "How did we manage to get into this predicament?" she murmured.

He smiled warmly down at her. "How about if we concentrate on how to get out of it instead?"

Faith nodded tentatively, then gave him an apologetic look. "This is all my fault, I'm afraid. I should never have asked you to meet me alone."

The music ended then, and everyone turned to applaud the musicians. Faith sank into another curtsy before allowing Gareth to lead her off the dance floor. But he slowed his steps a bit, and she looked up at him in question.

"You do know that as soon as we step off this floor we are going to be inundated with well-wishers and probably won't get another moment to ourselves."

Faith nodded.

He glanced around to see if anyone was listening. "Could you satisfy my curiosity about something?"

Faith tilted her head to the side and gave him a long, silent look.

He leaned down. "What was the real reason you lured me out into a dark garden in the middle of one of the biggest balls of the Season?"

At that, Faith bit her lip and looked down. She shuddered.

Alarmed, Gareth stopped and turned her to face him, no longer caring what the watching throng thought. He slipped a finger under her chin and tilted her face up. "Faith, I'm sorry! I didn't mean—" He stopped.

His fiancée looked up at him, her gray eyes shining with tears of mirth. Faith Ackerly, the ever-composed, ever-correct Society beauty, was laughing uncontrollably in the middle of the dance floor. "I'm sorry, my lord," she choked out, then took a deep breath and composed herself. "It just struck me as ironic that *I* lured *you* into a compromising situation, ruined *your* reputation, and now it appears I'll have to marry you in order to repair the damage."

Gareth smiled, but his heart constricted painfully at her words, for he knew that no matter what happened between them, she would always look back upon this situation and recall how she was forced to become his wife. He'd intended to court her and spoil her, to dance attendance and woo her until she couldn't imagine a life without him. "A bit of a twist on the tired old theme, isn't it?"

Faith nodded. "I really did mean to apologize for the way I treated you." Her expression was sober.

"You needed to do that in private?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Well, I wasn't sure how you would react," she said. "You see, I was also going to suggest that we not see each other again." She winced inwardly and watched his face. He continued to smile, but some of the warmth left his eyes.

"I do see," he said, drew her arm back through his, and turned to walk to where Amanda was now standing with Lady Egerton. "A love match this is not. Shall we go and face our horribly deluded public, princess?"

Faith nodded, although she suddenly felt much more like curling up in a ball in the corner.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of congratulations, hearty handshakes, and exclamations of surprise. By the time Faith finally found herself safely ensconced in her aunt's carriage, her hand was sore from being squeezed, and her facial muscles ached from the constant smiling. Aunt Cleo chattered excitedly all the way home, but Faith heard none of it over the steady throbbing of her head brought on by the horrible litany that kept repeating itself in her mind.

*I'm betrothed to a man who doesn't want me.*



## Twelve

Faith awoke with a start when the door to her room burst open. Before she had time to sit up and scrape her hair from her eyes, Grace streaked across the room and landed with a plunk on the bed beside her.

“Are you awake?” Her sister’s voice thrummed with breathless urgency.

Even after a full night’s rest, Faith always had trouble getting started in the morning. Since she’d spent most of the previous night in sleepless thought, finally falling into a fitful slumber as dawn approached, she pulled a pillow over her head, unwilling to accept that it was already time to get up. “I am now,” she mumbled.

With cheerful disregard for her usual thirty-minute waking ritual, Grace reached out and plucked the pillow from Faith’s face. “No you don’t!” she laughed when Faith threw an arm over her head and reached blindly for the covers. “You’re going to get up and tell me what happened last night.”

A sudden rush of painful recollection unceremoniously jolted Faith into wide-eyed awareness. She sat bolt upright, then closed her eyes in acute horror and dropped her face into her hands. “Oh, my God,” she moaned. She looked at Grace hopefully through her parted fingers. “It was just a dream, wasn’t it?”

Amused, Grace shook her head. “I don’t think so. Aunt Cleo was here first thing this morning with a story so wild I can scarcely credit it.”

Faith could well imagine what her blunt relative had come to say. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for the dressing gown she had draped across the footboard. As she slipped into the garment, she glanced down and wrinkled her nose at the mess Grace had made of her bed. “You’ve rumped the covers dreadfully,” she complained.

Grace shrugged and flopped irreverently onto her stomach, propped her chin in her hands, and began swinging her lower legs back and forth through the air with deliberate nonchalance. “Beds are supposed to be

rumpled in the morning,” she stated, then frowned. “And stop trying to change the subject. You can either decide to be frank with me and tell me what’s going on, or I shall be forced to accept Aunt’s version as the truth.”

Faith gave her sister a tolerant look, pointedly turned her back, and walked across the room to the wardrobe. “Think what you wish,” she said calmly, reaching in and selecting a powder blue linen morning gown with piping accents in a vibrant cobalt velvet.

“All right,” agreed Grace companionably.

Faith bent to select a pair of slippers from the neat row beneath her dresses. She leaned in to retrieve them.

Grace watched her sister rummage a moment and continued. “Aunt Cleo says you’ve compromised poor Gareth quite beyond recall.”

Completely forgetting she’d said much the same thing to Gareth herself Faith, felt her temper snap. She abruptly stood, unfortunately not taking into account the gowns that were hanging all around her. Hopelessly entangled in their diaphanous folds, she lost her balance, grabbed wildly at the air, and fell in a disgruntled heap on the wardrobe floor among her precisely arranged shoes. Too late, her flailing hands found something to grab. Unfortunately, it was only several delicate gowns, which promptly slipped from their hangers to settle about her head and shoulders in billowy clouds of silk, satin, and chiffon.

Gales of laughter erupted from the direction of the bed as Faith dragged herself from the floor of the wardrobe. She marched across the room to glare at her sister, leaving a trail of dresses and slippers in her wake. “Grace Olivia Caldwell, you get out of my room this instant!”

Wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, Grace stood up to leave and broke into renewed giggles at the sight of the formerly neat wardrobe. She turned back to Faith just in time to duck and avoid the pillow her sister had thrown. “All right already! I’m leaving,” she said, dodging a second pillow on her way to the door. She opened it and stepped out of firing range into the hall, then stuck her head back inside. “Oh—I forgot to tell you. Gareth sent word that he will be here at eleven o’clock to finalize things.”

Faith’s arm stopped in midthrow, and her eyes flew to the small clock on the mantel over the fireplace. It read ten forty-five.

With renewed ire, she threw the pillow. It landed with a harmless thud against the safely closed door.

It took the combined efforts of Grace's personal maid and two upstairs chambermaids who'd been pressed into emergency service, but at one minute to eleven, Faith was hurtling down the corridor from her bedroom fully dressed, a lavender satin slipper clutched in each hand.

She'd chosen the least complicated gown she owned, a lilac chiffon morning dress with short puffed sleeves and a simple scooped neckline. It closed in the back with only two small buttons and had a wide lavender satin ribbon that tied in an easy bow at the back of a high waistline. While Becky rummaged through the mess in the bottom of the wardrobe in search of her shoes, Faith did her own hair, brushing the front and sides away from her face and securing it with a silver filigree clip at her crown. A few moments later, a red-faced Becky emerged from the wreckage of the wardrobe and triumphantly held out the lavender slippers. Faith grabbed them, gave Becky a quick squeeze of thanks, and left the room.

She stood now at the top of the curving stairs and braced one hand on the newel post to balance as she lifted first one foot, then the other, so she could slide her feet into the soft shoes. She straightened and glanced in one of the small mirrors designed to reflect light from the sconces that hung on the wall in front of them. Satisfied that nothing seemed out of place, she turned and began walking sedately down the steps, completely unaware of the fetching picture she presented.

Her color was high, thanks to the frantic rush to get dressed, which gave a pleasing tint to her flawless skin. Her posture was as regally erect as ever, and with her hair falling from the silver clip in a luxurious tumble of golden waves and curls, instead of pinned up in its usual prim chignon, she didn't look nearly as unapproachable as usual. The lilac shade of the gown combined with the earlier excitement did amazing things to her eyes, turning them a startling shade of silver that glowed as though lit from within.

She reached the bottom of the staircase and paused a moment before stepping onto the ground floor. Holding on to the staircase, she leaned forward and looked to her left. Wilson was standing stiffly by the front door, ready to greet any callers who chose to present themselves, his face so expressionless that Faith couldn't tell if her own expected guest had arrived. She turned her head to the right and peered down the long corridor, then

caught her breath. O'Reilly was stationed just outside the parlor doors, a definite indication that someone was within.

Her heart skipped a beat. She realized with a touch of surprise that she was actually looking forward to seeing Gareth. She went down the last step and frowned as she walked slowly down the hall toward the parlor. She examined her feelings with consternation, trying to remember when she'd begun to feel this way, but couldn't come up with an explanation as she approached O'Reilly. This new emotion had come upon her so gradually she'd scarcely noticed it, although she had to admit that Gareth had always had an unsettling effect on her state of mind.

Deliberately, she shook off her reverie and smiled warmly at the footman. "I understand I have a guest, O'Reilly."

He nodded. "Indeed you do, Miss Faith. He hasn't been waiting long."

She leaned forward, lowering her voice a bit. And is he alone, or is my sister entertaining him?"

O'Reilly looked surprised by the question, but answered anyway. "He is alone, Miss Faith."

Faith's smile widened and she made the most impulsive decision of her entire life. She reached out and squeezed O'Reilly's hand. "Please do me a tremendous favor and try to stall the others when they come, would you? I'd like a few moments alone with my guest."

The footman nodded, and with a last beatific smile, Faith walked past him into the parlor. Feeling quite daring, she turned and began to close the door. At the last moment, not feeling quite brave enough to shut it completely, she decided to leave it half-open. With both hands still on the doorknob, she took a steadying breath.

"I'm glad we have a moment to ourselves, my lord."

She heard him swiftly suck in his breath, then heard his soft footsteps as he crossed the room. When she felt his gloved hand touch her shoulder, she let out her breath and turned to face him.

"I just knew you'd feel the same way I do, Miss Ackerly!"

Faith felt the color drain from her face when she realized the man now holding both her hands in a painful grip was not Gareth. It was Lord Horatio Grimsby. And he was looking at her with an expression of such triumphant satisfaction that Faith greatly feared he intended to kiss her!

Quickly, she pulled her hands from his, stepped neatly around him, and walked across the room to put some distance between them. She turned and jumped in startled surprise when she found him once more standing right behind her. Her eyes darted nervously to the half-closed door, and she took another step back.

“H-have you been offered refreshment, my lord?” Her stammering voice seemed loud in the awkward silence.

Horatio stepped closer. “The second you stepped into the room, my beauty, I was refreshed.” Faith looked at him in horror. He reached for her hand, looking rather pleased with himself after that poetic speech. She gulped and nimbly stepped aside, her mind searching furiously for a means of escape that would not be impolite. “Faith, my sweet, you needn’t be so modest. I heard you tell the footman you wished to be alone with me.”

She managed to quell a horrified gasp. “Perhaps, Lord Jameson—” she began.

He took another step forward, the light glinting off his spectacles. “You needn’t explain. I heard the rumors about last night, of course, but I didn’t credit them at all. I know that you, of all people, would never act as impulsively as the gossips say you did with someone like Gareth Lloyd.”

Faith put out a hand and backed away as he continued to advance. She tried again. “Perhaps, Lord Jameson, you should speak with my brother-in-law.” She sat down with a thump as the backs of her knees came into contact with the settee.

Horatio was on his knees before her in an instant, taking her hand. “I’d rather speak with your father.”

“That won’t be at all necessary,” came a curt voice from the hallway. The Marquess of Roth stood filling the doorway, an expression of stony displeasure on his handsome face.

Gareth had gone home immediately after the ball and spent a sleepless night pacing the library, trying to reconcile the fact that he was going to marry a woman who didn’t care for him, something he’d sworn he would never do. But he was optimistic by nature. By the time the sun rose, he’d managed to convince himself that, although Faith admittedly didn’t love him, there had already been a great deal of feeling between them. And where there was feeling, he knew there was hope of love.

He'd arrived at the Caldwell town house in a lighthearted mood. Wilson had opened the door and informed him that Faith was in the parlor. His step light, he'd approached O'Reilly, who stood outside, a horrified look on his face. Gareth smiled at him nonetheless and reached around to push open the half-closed door. Incredibly, the diminutive footman stepped in front of him just as Gareth caught a glimpse of Horatio Grimsby.

Roughly he'd moved O'Reilly aside and pushed open the door further to see Faith seated across the room, her hands clasped in those of Horatio, who knelt before her in a pose that could only mean one thing.

Faith surged to her feet at the sound of Gareth's voice, knocking Lord Jameson, who was also trying to stand, squarely on his rump. Her absurd burst of unexpected pleasure immediately faded, however, as she noticed the look on her fiancé's face. Coloring hotly, she looked down at Horatio, who was on his hands and knees, reaching under the settee and peering about as though looking for something. His hand slid along the floor under her skirts and suddenly grasped her ankle.

With a gasp of shocked outrage, Faith pulled her ankle free and stepped back...right onto the spectacles for which Horatio had been searching. Chagrined, she bent down and picked them up. The frame was askew and one lens was cracked. Horatio stood.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Jameson..." she began. But no further words came to her. She bit her lip and solemnly handed the spectacles over. The earl took them without a word. He straightened the frame as best he could, put them on, bowed stiffly to Faith, and turned to leave.

Nodding briefly to Gareth as he passed him in the doorway, he said, "Good day, my lord."

Gareth nodded back. "Jameson."

The earl's footsteps retreated down the hall. Gareth and Faith heard the front door open and close. Seconds passed. They stood without speaking, tension growing between them until it was almost palpable.

O'Reilly appeared in the doorway behind Gareth, an apologetic look on his face. Faith saw him and abruptly shook off the spell of silence. "It'll be fine," she assured the worried servant.

Gareth quirked an eyebrow at her, not realizing O'Reilly was there. "I'm afraid I would describe the sight of my fiancée of less than twenty-

four hours being proposed to again right under my nose as something other than ‘fine.’”

Faith drew herself up stiffly. “I wasn’t speaking to you, my lord.” She returned her attention to O’Reilly. “Please have one of the maids bring refreshments, then kindly inform Lord and Lady Huntwick that the Marquess of Roth has arrived.”

O’Reilly nodded. He caught the baleful glare of the marquess and gratefully scurried away.

Faith stood still, her chin up and her hands clasped loosely in front of her as she watched Gareth walk slowly across the room to stand before the tall windows. He looked out across the gardens, tapping the tip of his forefinger thoughtfully on his lips. “You’re not as calm as you appear, Faith,” he remarked, his tone even.

She refused to allow him to bait her. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, my lord.”

He turned to stare at her. “That serene facade of yours, that calm, unruffled demeanor you continually present to the world is really nothing but a sham, isn’t it?”

Faith’s lips tightened imperceptibly.

“Deep inside,” he continued in a soft voice, “you’re really just a quivering mass of pent-up fury—aren’t you, princess?”

She didn’t answer.

“And I’d imagine the thing you’d most like to do is to walk across the room and slap my face right now, isn’t it?” Gareth took a step away from the window and looked pointedly at Faith, whose hands were no longer clasped loosely in front of her; they were now clenched so tightly into little fists at her sides that the knuckles were white. He smiled ruefully. “I rather thought so,” he said.

Faith took a deep breath and forced herself to unclench her hands, silently willing her pounding heart to slow. Unbidden, her mind returned to the optimistic thoughts she’d had before entering the parlor. Resolutely, she pushed those thoughts from her mind. The memory of how stupidly she had looked forward to seeing Gareth would only serve to further infuriate her.

Her fiancé watched her struggle to regain her composure, his stomach tightening convulsively. He’d hoped, on his way over to the Huntwick town house, that some miracle might have occurred during the night, that

somehow Faith might have become happy they were to wed. Instead, he was forced to watch her attempts to hide her revulsion at simply being in the same room with him.

"I have to apologize for this whole fiasco," he supplied in an even tone. "My brother is rarely so impulsive."

"No," agreed Faith, her voice frosty. "I rather assumed he had left *that* particular character trait to you."

Gareth's jaw clenched. "You don't have to marry me, Faith."

Faith raised delicate brows. "Of course I don't, my lord," she replied in a voice laced with sarcasm. "My options are certainly open, aren't they? Shall I list them all for you?" Despite herself, she felt her anger rise when he didn't respond. She tossed her head and took a small step forward, holding up a single, slim finger.

"One," she began in a tight voice. "I can marry you to salvage my reputation." She held up another finger and took a longer step in his direction. "Two: I can decide *not* to marry you, and by so doing allow myself to become an object of scorn the gossips will rake over the coals for years to come." She smiled sweetly and took another step. "Option two has the added benefit of dragging my family's good name through the dirt, ruining any future marriage prospects for myself, and possibly keeping my younger sisters from being accepted in Society." She held up a third finger and stalked the rest of the way across the room until she stood directly in front of Gareth, her three raised fingers directly in his face. "Three, my lord..." she said, her quavering voice betraying her loss of control. "Do you even know what option three is?"

Gareth said nothing, reacted in no way, but a twitching muscle in his clenched jaw betrayed the fact that he'd heard her.

Faith glared up at him for another moment, then dropped her hand and turned away, feeling suddenly deflated. "There is no option three, my lord," she said quietly. "I was awake most of the night trying to find it."

"So was I," said Gareth. He stepped forward and placed his hands on her shoulders, gently turning her to face him. She lifted gray eyes huge with unshed tears. At the sight, he was instantly and completely defeated. Quietly he led her back to the settee, waited for her to sit down, and settled awkwardly in a chair facing her.



Faith bowed her head, unwilling for him to see her tears. Without warning, a handkerchief appeared under her nose. That was all it took.

Gareth watched as his fiancée buried her face in his handkerchief. Her slim shoulders began to shake. He moved over to sit next to her on the settee and gently pulled her head over to rest on his shoulder. He reached up and smoothed her silky hair. "We'll think of a way out of this, Faith," he soothed. "Somehow, we'll find a way for you to not have to marry me and still keep your reputation intact."

At that, Faith's shoulders began to quake even harder. She pushed away from him, slumped back on the settee, and pulled the handkerchief from her face.

Gareth shook his head. Again, she was laughing when he'd thought she was crying. Unsure if her laughter was a reaction of hysteria, he sat still, a bemused expression on his face.

When Faith finally gasped for breath and opened her eyes, she looked at him. His expression was sobering, because she sat up, made a visible effort to compose herself and reached for his hand. "I'm sorry, Gareth," she managed, then calmed herself a bit. "It's really not funny at all," she admitted, a glimmer of a smile still lurking about the corners of her mouth. "I was just realizing how inappropriately angry I've been with you. None of this is your fault, you see. As I pointed out last night, I lured you out to the garden and ruined your reputation."

"You also pointed out that you were about to relieve yourself of my unwanted attentions," he added.

She had the grace to blush. "I can explain that, my lord," she said. She lowered her voice as though she were telling him the most important secret of her life. "Most people don't know this about me, but usually I'm really very much in control of things."

Gareth fought back a smile and raised his eyebrows. "Really?" he drawled. "I hadn't noticed."

If Faith heard the grain of sarcasm in his voice, she chose to ignore it. "It's true," she confided. And the way I've been reacting to nearly everything you do has been something I've had a great deal of trouble controlling, so I thought it prudent that we no longer interact."

She looked down for a moment, then squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and looked bravely into his eyes. "In the last twenty-four

hours, I've exhibited every emotion I know, and done and said things I never thought I would. But in that space of time, out of everything that's happened, one thing stands out more than all the others." His eyes met hers, held them, and she suddenly found she was unable to summon the courage to tell him that she'd been looking forward to seeing him this morning. Instead, she looked down at her tightly clasped hands and forced herself to relax.

Gareth sensed she was about to tell him something very important, but that for some reason, the moment passed. He waited quietly, hoping she'd look up, hoping she'd speak. When she didn't, he leaned back and decided not to pursue it. Because what she had done, whether she knew it or not, was far more significant than her words could have possibly been. She'd given him hope. By admitting she could not control her reactions to him, she gave him the reason he needed: the possibility that she might someday love him. They might yet be able to forge a relationship like the one his parents had shared.

Abruptly, there were voices in the hall. Faith raised startled eyes to Gareth's rueful ones.

"It sounds as though my brother and your sister have arrived," he said with a twinge of regret. Then he took her hand and gave her a slow, encouraging smile. Standing, he drew her up next to him. "I think we can make this work, princess," he offered, his voice husky.

Faith looked up into his warm, dark eyes and felt suddenly as if he were the very best friend she'd ever had. She nodded once and let him draw her arm through his as they turned together to face their families.

## Thirteen

Gareth fanned his cards and considered his options. It was the first time in the four weeks since the announcement of his engagement that he'd found time to meet his friends at White's for an afternoon of fine spirits and good-natured wagering. Although the wedding preparations were mostly being handled by the Ackerly women, he'd tried to find as much time to spend with Faith as possible.

His fiancée, instead of softening toward him, had become increasingly distant and wary as the date approached. Several times, when he sensed she'd decided to toss her reputation to the winds and call the whole thing off, he'd found himself scrambling to tease and cajole her into reluctant laughter. He frowned and wondered, not for the first time, why he was working so hard to salvage a marriage that had not yet taken place.

"Cards not to your liking, Roth?"

He shook his head and tossed them facedown on the table. "Fold. The cards are fine. I can't keep my mind on the game. Now would be an excellent opportunity for both of you to fleece me out of some of my unexpected inheritance."

"Mind if we join you?"

Trevor Caldwell looked up from his cards to see Sebastian Tremaine, the Duke of Blackthorne, standing on the other side of the green-baize-covered table. He smiled in surprised pleasure and stood to extend a hand to his good friend. "Perfect timing! You know new blood is always welcome at this table, especially when it is that of an old friend." He turned and signaled a footman, who hastened to bring more chairs and take the newcomers' requests for drinks.

As the footman hurried off, Sebastian turned and gestured to the silent man who stood slightly behind him. "Permit me to introduce my distant cousin, Lachlan Kimball, Marquess of Asheburton, in town from Scotland for a couple weeks on business." Sebastian introduced Trevor, then turned to Jonathon and Gareth, who were also seated at the table.

Gareth looked up from shuffling the cards. “Good to meet you, Asheburton.” Lachlan gave a small nod and took a seat.

Gareth exchanged a surprised look with Trevor, who shrugged. Of the five men, the Marquess of Asheburton was easily the wealthiest. He was also the most reclusive, seldom leaving his estate in the wild Scottish Highlands. Rumors constantly made the rounds about the secretive marquess. One recent on-dit even said he’d married a poor but beautiful Scottish girl, and that he kept her locked in one of the towers of his ancient castle.

The quintet sat in silence for a few moments while Gareth deftly dealt a new hand to include Sebastian and Lachlan. All five men sat back, studied and arranged their hands.

“You’ve been away from town longer than usual, Thorne,” remarked Gareth. Jonathon laid two cards facedown on the table and nodded for his brother to deal him two more.

Sebastian raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Hunt’s young sister-in-law has been in town far too often lately, I’m afraid.”

Trevor, Jon, and Gareth laughed. Mercy Ackerly, Grace and Faith’s youngest sister, had a pronounced crush on the duke and was constantly devising elaborate strategies to get Blackthorne to fall in love with her.

Asheburton gave Sebastian a questioning look. When the duke remained silent, refusing to satisfy his cousin’s curiosity, Gareth gladly jumped in to provide the answers. “Last year, Thorne did his level best to run over Hunt’s youngest sister-in-law with his carriage.” Gareth caught Sebastian’s dampening glower, smirked, and continued. “He was, of course, instantly regretful and stopped the carriage to rush to her aid. When she regained consciousness from the blow to her head, Mercy was smart enough to realize how a rescued damsel in distress ought to act, and as required by all such damsels, obligingly fell instantly in love with our brooding hero.”

Trevor grinned. “Unfortunately, little Mercy was only twelve at the time.”

Sebastian finally spoke up. “*Nearly* thirteen,” he corrected.

Trevor’s grin widened.

Gareth looked at Lachlan. “I suspect Thorne now wishes he’d done a better job of running her down, because she’s almost fourteen now and

more determined than ever to have hi—”

“Which is why,” interrupted Jon with a quelling frown at his younger brother, “he shows enormous wisdom in avoiding her.” He turned to Sebastian. “You should know—,” he began.

“That we will all be meeting at my town house tomorrow morning at ten o’clock,” interrupted Trevor hastily before Jonathon could ruin the fun. “You’ll both be there, of course.” He nodded to include Asheburton.

“Of course,” replied Sebastian with a curious look. “What’s the occasion?”

Trevor raised his brows. “Would you believe you will be attending the Marquess of Roth’s wedding?”

Sebastian glanced across the table at the man he’d often considered an insolent pup. “Well, young Roth. A title, a fortune, *and* a wife, all in short order.” He sipped his brandy and pushed back his chair, stretching out his legs. “Appears to have been a banner year for you.”

Lachlan looked from Gareth’s smug face to Trevor’s amused one, then from Jonathon’s grim face to Sebastian’s bored countenance. “All right,” he said finally. “If Thorne won’t ask, I will. Who’s the happy bride?”

“My sister-in-law,” said Trevor.

Sebastian pulled in his legs and sat up straight.

A look of cold revulsion crossed Lachlan’s face. “Did I not hear you say she was only fourteen?” he asked incredulously.

“*Nearly* fourteen,” drawled Trevor.

Sebastian regained his composure. He reached into his pocket for his cheroot case, flipped it open, selected one, and offered the case to Lachlan. “Not to worry, cousin. There are quite enough Ackerly sisters around for me to be assured that Roth is robbing no cradle.” He inclined his head toward Gareth. “Faith, is it?”

Gareth nodded. Trevor opened his mouth to say something, but Jonathon leveled him with a stern look. “That’s what I wished to tell you, Thorne. The entire Ackerly clan will be in attendance tomorrow—including Mercy.”

Gareth made a dour face at his brother and signaled a footman to bring his coat. “I would enjoy having all of my friends at my wedding,” he said, standing and shrugging into the garment the footman produced. He paused a moment, looking directly at Sebastian. “Of course, I’ll completely

understand if you find Mercy's presence a bit...intimidating." As the figurative glove he'd tossed settled lightly to the ground, he tipped his hat to the rest of the men at the table. "Again, good to meet you, Asheburton. Gentlemen." And with a last challenging grin, he left.

Sebastian stared at his retreating back and slowly stamped out his cheroot, glancing at Trevor with resignation. "Ten o'clock, did you say?"

## Fourteen

Faith looked at the apparition in the mirror with a growing sense of unease. The tall young lady staring back looked far too composed and sure of herself to possibly be her own reflection. Not when her hands were cold and clammy, her mouth was dry as cotton, and it felt as though the thousands of butterflies that had recently migrated to the vicinity of her midsection seemed rather inclined to stay there.

“Bend your knees, Faith, so I can reach the top of your head.”

Startled from her thoughts, she glanced over her shoulder at Grace, who stood waiting to pin the short ice blue veil around the conservative knot at the crown of her head with a gleaming circlet of sapphires.

Something in her enormous gray eyes made Grace pause momentarily. “Are you all right?”

Faith nodded tightly, then paused and shook her head. “No...,” she began, then tightened her lips and closed her eyes. She walked slowly to the bed and sat down on the edge. “I can’t explain, really. This all just seems so wrong.”

Grace moved quickly to her sister’s side. “Wrong how, Faith?” She sat and clasped both of her sister’s hands.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “My stomach is queasy, my legs are shaky, my hands are clammy and my head is pounding. It just doesn’t seem as though a bride should feel this way on her wedding day.”

Grace looked troubled. “I’d hoped you had come to care for Gareth,” she said. “He’s been courting you for the past month.”

“That’s just it. One moment I do care for him, then the next I’m infuriated beyond reason. He makes me feel so very”—Faith waved her hands, searching for the proper word—“so very disordered. I *hate* that.”

Grace sat back and smiled, then had to lean forward to catch Faith’s next muttered words.

“And I’m frightened.”

“Of what?”

Her mind skipped back through Gareth's daily visits during the last four weeks. Every time she'd managed to work up the courage to tell him of her fears and misgivings, he'd brushed her tentative forays into the topic aside. He either teased her until she laughed helplessly and forgot what she'd meant to say, or if they were away from prying eyes, he'd gathered her into his arms and kissed her into breathless insensibility. "Of Gareth kissing me. I can't think when he kisses me. I just wish we'd gotten to know one another better *before* he kissed me. It seems so improper and illogical and..." She trailed off.

Knowing Faith had no concept of how entirely amusing her words were, Grace stifled the urge to laugh and sat back and thought for a moment. "You'd feel better if you had a little more time to get to know him?"

Faith nodded.

"And you *do* look forward to knowing him better?" Grace persisted.

"If he would talk..." Faith suddenly looked up and narrowed suspicious eyes on her sister's thoughtful profile. "What are you planning?"

Grace looked at the clock on the mantel and briskly stood up. "Don't you worry about a thing. I'm going to go downstairs. I'll send Amity up to help you." She walked quickly to the door.

"Grace," said Faith in a warning tone.

Her sibling stopped with a hand on the doorknob. She smiled sweetly. "Shall I send Charity, too?"

"Heavens no!" gasped Faith. "She's done nothing but plague me since they arrived. All day yesterday she followed me about, curtsying every few moments and slaughtering Gareth's title. I think her latest name for me is the Marchioness of Sloth."

Grace laughed. "The Duke of Blackthorne arrived about an hour ago with his cousin, the Marquess of Asheburton. Lord Asheburton is so quiet and mysterious that Charity has made it a personal mission to try and goad him into conversation. I think you're safe from her for a while." Then she closed the door and disappeared before Faith could stop her.

You wished to see me, my lady?" The Marquess of Roth strode into the sitting room a mere twenty minutes before his wedding ceremony was to



begin.

Grace turned from the window, through which she'd been watching the preparations. "Gareth," she said with a warm smile. "Thank you for taking the time to come talk with me." She glanced once more out the window and cleared her throat. "I'll come right to the point, as we've not much time. I'm afraid Faith has certain...um..." She coughed delicately, then continued, "Misgivings about this marriage."

Gareth's face remained unchanged, although his pleasant smile suddenly seemed a bit brittle. "Misgivings?" His voice was polite.

Grace wrinkled her nose. "Oh, the usual. Hasty courtship, obligatory engagement, rushed wedding." She shrugged. "It's made me wonder, too. I mean, why are you really marrying my sister? Do you even *want* to marry her?"

Gareth stiffened. "Why do you ask?"

"Mostly because she's my sister. Partly because you're my friend," she replied, slanting him a glance. "And then there's that whole bothersome 'love' issue." She smiled up at him.

Gareth felt the figurative noose settling neatly about his neck, for he had been haunted by this issue as well. "Are you asking me if I love your sister?"

Grace searched his tense face and seemed to find what she sought. "No," she said decisively.

Gareth felt the rope loosen a bit. It tightened again horribly with her next words.

"But can *she* love *you*?"

Gareth flinched. It was the same question he'd asked himself over and over.

He gave Grace a direct look. "I can't *make* her love me, Lady Huntwick," he admitted.

Grace pursed her lips thoughtfully. "No, but perhaps you can *teach* her to." Musing, she walked a few paces away, then turned resolutely back. "Do you wish to marry my sister? Would you have wished to marry her even were you not in your current circumstances?"

"You know the answer," replied Gareth quietly.

"Would you be willing to give her a gift that will help her through this wedding day with ease?"

“I would,” he heard himself answer.

“Then marry her today, but give her time to know you better, time to fall in love with you before...before you consummate your vows.”

The noose tightened again. Gareth very nearly felt his feet leave the floor. He said nothing, just looked at Grace steadily, wondering how he'd let her maneuver him so neatly into her trap. Was this the sort of thing any other man had been asked on his wedding day? He imagined not.

Grace watched him for a moment, then blushed hotly and looked away. “I know it isn't a small request, my lord, but really, my reasons for asking —”

“I'll do it.”

“P-pardon me?” Grace stammered.

Gareth turned to walk out of the room. “I said I'll do it,” he repeated. “Go tell Faith I've agreed to her request, and let's get on with this wedding.”

“But Gareth!” called Grace, then stopped when she realized he was beyond earshot; he'd already stridden from the room. “Faith doesn't know I asked it of you,” she finished lamely to herself.

## Fifteen

**Y**ou did *what*?" Faith sat down heavily at the dressing table in her bedroom, completely disregarding any possible damage to her wedding gown. Amity sank to her knees and grasped her hand in sympathy.

Charity laughed out loud. "Good job, Grace! You have him right over a barrel, Faith," the irrepressible twin chortled, stretching out on her stomach across the bed.

"Charity!" Amity admonished with a reproving frown.

Grace managed to look slightly chagrined. "It just gives you time to know each other better before things get..." She paused as she looked at her two younger siblings. "Complicated," she finished inadequately.

"What does *consummate* mean?" Mercy piped up from the doorway.

"Hush, Mercy," said Grace and Faith together.

"Yes. Hush, Mercy. Go find your duke and bother him," added Charity, then stuck out her tongue at Amity, who glowered at her again.

Mercy looked obstinate for a moment, then brightened. "I think I'll go let Lord Asheburton know Charity is sweet on him."

Charity sat up and glared. "You wouldn't dare," she said warningly.

"Wouldn't I?" Mercy's voice was taunting. She took a step back, then turned and fled as Charity leapt off the bed and lunged for the door.

Faith ignored the altercation between her siblings, a frown furrowing her forehead as a sudden thought struck her. "Gareth couldn't have been happy with this suggestion of yours."

Grace felt a slight twinge of guilt, but answered truthfully. "He agreed with me, and told me to come tell you."

Faith looked steadily at her sister before standing up with a sigh. "Well, I must say that it is an immense relief to know he intends to begin our marriage on equal footing." She extended a hand down to help Amity up from the floor. "Shall we go down? If we hurry, we'll only be a few minutes late."

They all gathered quietly under the arbor in the garden, a small group of people to witness the wedding of one of the richest and most powerful men in the land to one of its most beautiful women. As Faith took her place beside Gareth, she gave him a serene smile intended as a thank-you for his attempt to relieve her tension on their wedding day. It only served to fuel the fury that had been building inside him since his earlier conversation with Grace. To Gareth, the smile looked impossibly smug, further evidence that she'd known exactly how and when to play her trump card.

Somehow he managed to speak his vows, taking her as his wife before God, half-expecting lightning to strike as he promised to love and cherish her, when all he really wanted right now was to turn Faith over his knee and soundly spank her treacherous little backside.

He smiled tightly throughout the party after the ceremony, but refused to tolerate it for long. As soon as he was able, he caught his new bride's hand and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

"It's time to go."

Faith felt a small pang of fear in her stomach at the thought of leaving her family to begin a life of her own, especially under such awkward circumstances, but she nodded and excused herself to go change out of her wedding gown. She'd thought she had gained some measure of control with Gareth's promise, but now she wasn't so sure. She would soon be in unfamiliar territory, and that greatly affected her level of comfort.

Gareth watched her walk away in silence, then strolled over to Trevor, who was deep in conversation with Sebastian and Lachlan. After a brief pause, he interrupted smoothly. "Hunt, have you a moment?"

"Of course." Trevor excused himself and the two walked a few steps away. "What's on your mind?"

"Faith and I will be spending some time at Rothmere rather than remaining in town for the rest of the Season. Would you mind having Grace send Faith's belongings there?"

Trevor looked surprised. "I thought the estate was under renovation."

"It is," said Gareth, his tone uninformative.

Trevor gave his friend a level look. "Grace went upstairs to help her sister change. Won't Faith let her know where she'll be?"

Gareth's face remained impassive. "Faith does not yet know," he answered, and walked abruptly away.

Trevor watched him go, grinning in delight. After his own tumultuous courtship of Grace, he was more than happy to see that he wasn't the only man who had trouble controlling his wife.

Faith sat primly erect in one corner of the well-sprung coach, her hands folded demurely in her lap, her reticule placed neatly at her feet. She hadn't been quite sure where she should sit after the footman handed her up into the vehicle; she'd stood for a moment in the doorway, looking from left to right before finally settling on the seat to her right. Once there, however, she realized she didn't know if Gareth would prefer sitting beside her, or if he would choose to occupy the seat across from her. She bit her lip in indecision. Then inspiration struck and moved her to the corner furthest from the door. She'd leave room beside her and let him decide.

She'd just gotten settled when she heard his booted feet coming down the town house steps and across the walk. The coach dipped and he filled the open doorway. Faith held her breath as he settled into the seat across from her and stretched his long legs diagonally across the open space in the middle.

Well, she allowed, *that* mystery was solved.

The footman closed the door. A moment later the coach began moving. Gareth stared out the window, seemingly lost in thought. Faith was left in silence to contemplate her new role in life.

Awkwardness reigned as she stole glances at her husband's profile, drinking in his appearance while he wasn't watching. She felt as though she should say something to ease the tension, but she couldn't think of a single topic, so she finally reverted to the weather. "It really is quite a pretty day, is it not, my lord?"

"Quite," Gareth replied crisply and lapsed back into silence.

Taken aback by her husband's curt manner, Faith leaned forward to look out the window to see what had caught his interest. To her surprise, the number of buildings they were passing was thinning, and she noticed the road becoming a great deal bumpier. The carriage seemed to be leaving London. Her eyebrows drew together in confusion, and she looked back to find him watching her with an assessing gaze.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

“To Rothmere.”

“What’s Rothmere?” Faith said after a moment of silence indicated Gareth did not intend to elaborate.

The corners of her husband’s mouth twitched into the semblance of a smile. “Your home,” he replied flatly. The fleeting grin disappeared at the sobering thought of how very little they actually knew about each other. She didn’t even know the name of his estate.

“But I thought we would be staying in Town for the Season,” protested Faith.

“You were wrong.”

“But my family—”

“Should all know by now.”

Faith sat back without another word and looked across the coach at her new husband’s averted face. A muscle clenched in his jaw, and she suddenly realized that Gareth was blisteringly angry. Gone was the teasing suitor she’d met at her sister’s wedding, the dashing gentleman who’d waltzed her around a balcony one night and kissed her into near insensibility in Amanda’s gazebo the next. This man, she did not know.

He pulled his gaze from the rolling scenery and caught her watching him. Hastily she looked down, growing more and more uncomfortable with the charged silence that stretched between them. She tried to think of what she could have done to cause this anger. She’d so hoped to spend the next few days getting to know him.

And then it hit her: Grace’s request.

Her head snapped up and her gray eyes narrowed on Gareth’s rigid profile. Her sister had said he’d agreed to the request, but what if he’d thought she would call off the wedding if he didn’t agree? He was apparently too honorable to do so, so Gareth might have felt trapped into the whole affair.

She peered at him more closely. It almost looked as if he were pouting. “My lord,” she said firmly.

He spared her a glance.

She cleared her throat. “I begin to think you are angry about something.”

He turned back to the window. “Indeed?”

“But of course, my lord,” Faith replied in a reasonable tone. “You’ve hardly uttered a word since we started, you’ve changed our destination without so much as doing the courtesy of letting me know, and when you do deign to speak, it is in short, monosyllabic responses that are both rude and uninformative.” She stopped, took a breath, and concluded. “Therefore, I came to the logical assumption that something has vexed you.”

Gareth raised both eyebrows. “Your powers of deduction are *truly* astonishing, my lady,” he drawled. “Were you, by chance, able to take another leap of logic and ascertain what might have made me so angry?”

The heavy sarcasm in his tone was not lost on Faith. “I have an idea, of course,” she allowed, annoyed to find herself bristling at his attitude.

“Then, please, my lady. Enlighten me.”

Faith raised her chin. “I believe you’ve begun to regret the agreement you struck with Grace.”

“Ah, yes.” His voice softened and yet became somehow menacing. “The agreement.”

Something in his tone made Faith wary. “You did send Grace upstairs to tell me of your willingness to participate, did you not?”

“Yes, I did,” replied Gareth. “But I must add, I was so taken aback by her suggestion that I neglected to clarify a few issues.”

Faith was instantly alert. “Issues?”

“Yes, princess, issues.” He looked directly at her for the first time since they’d begun their journey, and Faith realized that he’d been neither pouting nor bored. He was coldly, frighteningly furious.

Unconsciously she shrank back against the velvet-covered seat, almost flinching when he leaned forward and began reeling off the list of items he wished to have clarified. “First, my lady, exactly how long is ‘a little while’? That’s very ambiguous, you see. So very open to free interpretation.”

Faith realized she was almost cowering before him. Resolutely, she sat up straighter and squared her shoulders.

“Second,” he continued. “How well do you feel you need to know me before you will allow our relationship to progress? Seeing as we are already married.”

Faith tightened her lips into a thin line as she felt annoyance begin to build.

Gareth leaned back casually, crossing his arms over his chest. "Do you need a detailed family history, maybe? Perhaps a list of my likes and dislikes, such as my favorite color or which season of the year I most prefer?" His eyelids dropped lazily over his pupils as his gaze drifted from her face down her body. His lips curved in an appreciative leer. "Of course, there are some things that we already know rather well about each other, aren't there?"

Faith felt her breath catch at the look of hunger in his deep brown eyes. Her breasts tingled where his eyes had lingered, almost as though he had actually touched her. "Why are you d-doing this?" Her voice caught, stumbled on the words.

The sensuous look vanished instantly. "Because you ambushed me on our wedding day," he bit out. "You waited until I couldn't back out, then trapped me in a passionless marriage."

"But I didn't!" began Faith before stopping. If she told Gareth while he was in this mood that Grace had been acting alone when she spoke with him, there was no way he would ever believe her. Worse, he'd likely resent her and lose respect for her if she blamed it all on her sister. She closed her mouth and looked steadily across the coach at the hooded gaze of her husband.

He looked away. "You could have trusted me, Faith. I'd have listened, had you simply told *me* of your misgivings."

Unseen by Gareth, she bit her lip and looked down, guilty. Although her sister had acted without her prior knowledge, it had been Faith's own irrational fears that precipitated the unusual request. It was sobering to think that Gareth would likely have given her the time she needed, had she but asked. She thought back over the whole time she had known him and realized with a sudden pang that he had never, by word or action, treated her unkindly, while her own attitude toward him had been anything but kind.

The carriage slowed. Faith leaned forward and looked out the window again, wondering if they had already arrived at Rothmere. To her disappointment, she saw they were pulling into the drive of a small, well-kept inn.

Gareth stirred and glanced at his wife, who was busy looking out the window and pulling on her gloves. The carriage stopped and the door



opened.

“My lord?” The marquess looked at the footman standing patiently beside the steps he’d just lowered. “The outrider you sent ahead has only managed to secure a single room. It seems the inn is full, my lord.”

Faith’s head snapped up. “This is where we will spend the night?”

“Of course,” replied Gareth. “The hour grows late. Why else would we be stopping?”

The full import of the footman’s words hit her, and Faith’s heart leapt into her throat. She would be sharing a room with Gareth. “I thought, perhaps, for dinner?” she offered weakly.

Gareth’s eyes narrowed on her pale face and frightened eyes. He instantly guessed her thoughts and smiled. “You needn’t worry, princess. I’ll be keeping my promise.”

Without waiting for her to respond, he stepped out of the coach, leaving a bemused Faith behind to help herself down and follow in his wake.

## Sixteen

Faith stared at the plate of food placed before her. The roast was overcooked, the carrots boiled nearly colorless, and the bread bordered on stale. It hardly mattered. Her appetite had fled the moment the servants departed, leaving her alone in the room with two spindly chairs, a small table, her husband, and a bed.

The bed dominated her thoughts. It was, as beds went, nothing special. Much smaller than her own bed at home in Pelthamshire, it was not even close to the size of the luxurious one in which she slept when she visited Grace. Even so, small though it was, it was the most intimidating piece of furniture she'd ever seen.

"Have you finished eating, my lady?"

Startled, Faith tore her eyes from the bed and glanced at the serving girl who stood at her elbow. "Why, yes," she said quickly. "I'm afraid I wasn't very hungry," she added as the buxom girl picked up the still-full plate and then bent forward and reached across the table to retrieve Gareth's, providing him with an unobstructed view of her ample chest. When his eyes lingered for a moment on the proffered sight, Faith felt a spurt of annoyance.

She sat primly silent for a moment after the serving girl left, then stood. Resolutely, she walked to the bed. There were two rather flat pillows at the head, and it was covered by a single blanket and sheet. She chewed on her lip a moment before remembering the appreciative glance Gareth had given the endowments of the tavern maid. With a great deal of satisfaction, she snatched both pillows *and* the blanket from the bed, carried them to one corner of the room, and dropped them on the floor under the window.

Gareth watched from his place at the table. She laid the blanket down and folded it once lengthwise, then placed the pillows at one end. She took a step back, surveyed her work, and gave a small nod as if satisfied.

Gareth wasn't sure what he expected to see when she turned to look at him, but it certainly wasn't the small, polite smile she gave. He almost smiled in return before he caught himself and managed to retain his carefully aloof expression.

Her smile faded and she fidgeted. "My lord?"

Gareth raised a single eyebrow.

"Might I have a moment of privacy?"

A small blush stole across his wife's face as she stood, patient, the moonlight streaming in through the window behind her and turning her hair into a gilded halo. Though her face held the same remote, serene expression as usual, the faint pink color that tinted her cheeks made her seem a bit less composed. Approachable, even. Adorable. Completely kissable.

His thoughts returned to the promise he'd made her sister. Suddenly, he felt peevish and disagreeable.

He scowled. "No," he replied decidedly.

Faith blinked, not certain she'd heard correctly. "Excuse me, my lord?"

"I said no, princess. You may *not* have a moment of precious privacy. I might not be able to make you my wife in every sense of the word, but I will not, in order to protect your maidenly sensibilities, be put out of my chamber when I'm ready to go to bed."

He stood and removed his jacket, tossed it over his chair, and pulled his shirt from the waistband of his trousers. Faith stood stock-still and stared as he began unfastening the studs that held his shirtfront together. A wider and wider expanse of chest began to appear, allowing her a glimpse of the crisply curling dark hair that covered his bronzed skin. She gasped and came to her senses when he began shrugging out of the garment, but not before she saw his broad shoulders rippling with lean muscle.

She took a quick step back and turned away, stumbling across the blanket she'd just laid down. She caught the edge of the windowsill to keep herself from falling, then closed her eyes and rested her hot forehead on the cool pane of glass in sublime embarrassment.

She stayed that way even after the shuffling stopped behind her, didn't even turn around when her husband spoke. "Will you be sleeping in the bed or on the floor, my lady?"

"The floor," she managed to choke out. She heard him pull back the thin sheet and settle onto the creaking bed.

When the noises stopped, she looked cautiously around. Gareth was lying on his back under the inadequate covering of the sheet, his hands locked together behind his head, staring fixedly at the ceiling. Faith's eyes ran down the length of his covered body. With a start of shock, she realized he wasn't wearing anything beneath.

Flames leapt once more to her face. She looked longingly across the room at the small valise she had packed, realizing she wouldn't have a chance to change into her comfortable sleeping attire unless she did it in front of Gareth. With a sigh of resignation, she bent and straightened the blanket she'd knocked askew when she'd stumbled. That done, she removed her slippers, adjusted one of the pillows with her toe, and stretched out with her face to the wall. She heard the bed creak as Gareth leaned over and blew out the lamp. Silence descended with the darkness upon the small room.

Gareth lay flat on his back and smiled grimly at the ceiling. This was not exactly how he'd planned to spend his wedding night. Visions of Faith paraded through his mind, and always she was in his arms: whirling down that balcony in a solitary waltz, melting against him in Amanda's garden, shaking with laughter on the settee in her sister's drawing room.

He stole a glance at her prone form lying beneath the light blanket. She had her knees drawn up to her chest and her head cradled on one bent arm. The moonlight flowed in through the window above where she lay, seeming drawn to the pale strands of her silken hair, touching it gently until those locks glowed a cool silver against the rough floorboards. With a small pang of guilt, Gareth realized how uncomfortable she must be on the hard floor. Yet she did not move or shift, or even whimper in complaint.

He watched her for a while, watched her shoulders go from the rigid stillness that let him know she was awake to limp and relaxed, as sleep overtook her. When her breathing finally became deep and even, Gareth sat up.

Quietly, he pulled on his trousers and walked across the room to kneel beside her sleeping form. He leaned over to look at her face. Her lips were serene and her eyes closed, the russet lashes casting long shadows upon her cheeks. There was a small pucker between her eyebrows, making Gareth think her dreams must be perplexing. He stifled a chuckle. No doubt she

was dreaming of him. His inward smile faded, though, as he reflected upon how very true that likely was.

Resolutely, he quelled the resentment that welled within him. Despite their differences, there was no reason for either of them to spend the balance of the night cold and uncomfortable. He gathered her carefully against his chest, blankets and all, and lifted her in his arms. He walked back to the bed and set her down. She stirred and murmured something, but didn't awaken. Gareth walked back to the window, retrieved the pillows, and tucked one under her head.

He took a step back and contemplated her sleeping form. She still looked quite uncomfortable, dressed in her traveling gown, but he didn't see how he could remove it without waking her. With a shrug, he tucked the blanket and the sheet around her shoulders and walked around the bed. There he yawned, unbuttoned his trousers, and stepped out of them. Carefully he climbed into the bed next to Faith, pulled up the covers, and went promptly and comfortably to sleep.

## Seventeen

**T**he felt far warmer and safer than she could ever remember feeling. Still half-asleep, Faith smiled dreamily and snuggled deeper into the cocooning comfort that enveloped her, easily slipping back into the very pleasant dream she'd been having. She couldn't imagine being anywhere more agreeable.

At the same moment, Faith's gentle wriggling woke Gareth. He found himself cradling her securely in his arms, her hair tumbled across his face, one of her hands curved trustingly within his. A feeling of peace stole through him. He turned his head, buried his face deep into her silken curls, and purposely lost himself in her intoxicating scent; he could indeed fall back to sleep in such perfect conditions. But then Faith wriggled again, and his peace was shattered.

With her back cradled against his chest and her long legs bent at the knees, her body closely followed the angle of his own beneath the blanket. But that wasn't what truly disrupted his comfort. What disturbed him was the wriggling. Faith's trim backside was pressed into the hollow created by his bent knees, and each little wriggle she made was arousing him beyond words. Arousing him to the point that he was sure she would notice.

He clenched his teeth and closed his eyes, forced himself to think of the progress that should have been made on the roof at Rothmere during the time he'd been in London. When that didn't work, he tried thinking about the modernizations he was having made to the bathing rooms. *That*, however, was an enormous mistake. The first image that popped into his mind was of Faith immersed in the large marble bathtub, surrounded by bubbles, her long golden hair cascading down her shoulders and across her back in wet, glistening ropes.

He gave his head an abrupt shake to clear it of the unwelcome image, but the movement finally caused Faith to stir. Yawning, she raised her arms over her head and stretched, then stopped when she felt the unresisting body behind her. Always slow to rouse from slumber, Faith looked around the

unfamiliar room with a dazed frown. When she still couldn't recall where she was, she tilted her head backward on the pillow. Her sleepy gray eyes locked on a pair of warm brown ones.

With a gasp she came fully awake, horrified at the rush of information flooding her mind. Before she could fully process a thought, the next tumbled through her head, worse than the one before. She was, she recalled, at an inn a half day's drive from London. She was in bed with a man who was, apparently, wearing no shirt. That man was her husband. And she was lying, quite comfortably, within the circle of his arms.

At that last realization, she gave a startled yelp and sat up, frantically clawing her tousled hair from her face. When she could at last see clearly, she looked down at the mess she'd made of the bed and the covers and realized Gareth was not merely shirtless. He was also trouserless.

Heat flooded her cheeks. In a flurry of tangled bedclothes and petticoats, Faith scrambled to escape the bed, catching an ankle in the twisted sheets. She reached for the wall, caught nothing but air, and tumbled unceremoniously to the floor.

Gareth leaned on his side and looked down over the edge of the bed. Faith was sprawled in an angry, undignified heap below. He grinned. "I'm so sorry. May I help you up, my lady?"

Faith glared at him. "You have no clothes on," she accused.

"You talk in your sleep," he countered.

Her mouth dropped open. "I do not!"

Gareth gave her a smug smile, happy just to have shaken her from the calm, icy demeanor she'd displayed the previous evening.

Faith realized her mouth was still hanging open and closed it with a snap. "Just what was I doing in that bed anyway?"

Her husband raised his brows. "Sleeping," he replied, then thought a moment. "And talking."

"No," she argued, her teeth clenched in exasperation. "I meant how did I *get* there?"

"I put you there."

Faith looked perplexed. "Why?" She raised questioning gray eyes to his deep brown ones and held his gaze for a long moment. Something passed between them, an intangible feeling Faith almost recognized. She'd

felt it even in their earliest conversations. It was as though she knew him, had always known him. Her eyes softened imperceptibly. “Why, please?”

Gareth, too, felt the impact when her stare met his, but that only served to remind him of all he’d hoped would come of their union—all he now suspected they’d never have. He scowled at her softly put question.

“Because, princess,” he drawled, “you’d be nothing but a damned nuisance to drag about the countryside if you became ill from sleeping on the cold floor.” Abruptly, he rolled from beneath the covers to the far side of the bed, standing and reaching for his trousers.

Behind him he heard Faith’s shocked gasp and the rustle of her wrinkled skirts as she turned away from the sight of his naked form. He dressed quickly and walked to the door. “We’ll depart in half an hour,” he told her, and raked her with a contemptuous glance as she finally turned to look at him. “I trust you can make yourself presentable in that time?”

Faith remained silent, but her lips thinned and two bright spots of color appeared on her cheeks—testament to her barely suppressed anger. Gareth gave a low chuckle, opened the door, and left, pulling it firmly closed behind him. An immediate thud on the wooden panel told him he’d just narrowly missed being clobbered by something, most likely one of the slippers she’d worn the day before. An identical thud followed a second later, confirming his theory.

Smiling broadly, Gareth made his way down the narrow hall to the stairs. Provoking his wife beyond the limits of her self-control had definitely improved his mood.

He was nearly finished with his breakfast twenty minutes later when Faith appeared, a sweet expression on her face. She sat down across from him, nodding regally as he politely rose.

“Thank you, my lord,” she murmured, and began eating from the plate a footman set before her, taking delicate bites of the poached egg and creamed beef on toast. There was no hint of the anger she’d displayed earlier, neither in her expression nor demeanor. Gareth sat back down to finish his breakfast, then politely waited for her to do the same.

Faith kept her expression neutral. Inside, though, she seethed with fury. She stole a quick glance at her husband when he bent his head to light a cheroot. He looked a bit impatient, she thought, watching his eyes fall pointedly on her still-full plate.



With immense satisfaction, Faith took a delicate bite half the size of one she'd normally take, laid down her fork, and folded her hands in her lap. Deliberately, she chewed her bite a full twenty times before she picked up the fork again. Four bites later, Gareth finished his cheroot and roughly pushed back his chair. Faith looked up at him, her gray eyes wide with innocence.

"I'll just go see if the coach is ready, my lady," he said, hoping she'd take the hint to eat faster. He strongly suspected she was deliberately goading him but couldn't prove it without giving her the satisfaction of knowing she had succeeded. Refusing to concede even a small victory, he bowed and strode from the dining room without a backward glance.

Faith waited until she was sure her husband had gone, smiled to herself, and began eating at her usual pace. When finished, she counted slowly to one hundred, stood, stretched, then sauntered slowly toward the door. Just before she stepped outside, she pasted a calm, serene smile on her face and glided out into the inn yard.

Gareth was pacing impatiently back and forth in front of the lowered steps of the coach. When he caught sight of her, he stopped and waited beside the steps to help her inside. "We've a great deal of time to make up if we're to reach Rothmere before nightfall," he stated flatly, a note of reproach in his voice.

Faith nodded in apparent deference, her eyes cast carefully downward to conceal the gleeful glint she knew must be there. This, she vowed silently, would be the longest, most frustrating trip of her husband's life. Between not allowing her to express her misgivings before the wedding, his surly demeanor during the ride to the inn, and the entire farce of a wedding night they'd just shared, she'd had enough. And the peremptory way he'd begun ordering her about this morning had quite pushed her over the edge.

She climbed in and settled comfortably back against the velvet seat, watching through the open door as Gareth issued some last-minute instructions to the coachman. In profile, his face was starkly handsome, a face the great artists of the Renaissance would have loved to capture on canvas. Something one of the outriders said made him break into sudden laughter, and Faith felt her heart constrict wistfully. Laughter transformed his face from a thing of chiseled beauty to one of boyish roguishness, but the metamorphosis vanished when he climbed into the coach, the

momentary glow of humor fading and turning his eyes from warm chocolate back into glittering chips of obsidian.

Faith swallowed past the sudden lump in her throat and looked down at her hands, willing herself to remember the reasons they were at odds. With that forced memory, her resolve came flooding back, restoring her serenity.

They'd only been traveling twenty minutes when Faith delicately cleared her throat. "My lord?" She made her voice as weak as she could manage.

Gareth looked up from the document he was reading. "What?" he asked, his voice curt.

"May we stop a moment, please?" she asked. "I'm quite unused to traveling at this speed, and I'm afraid I'm feeling rather ill."

Gareth bit back obvious annoyance. "Perhaps if we slow down a bit," he suggested, though clearly loath to lose more time and possibly end up spending another night on the road.

Faith shook her head. "No, my lord," she protested with a hand to her stomach. "I really *must* get out for a moment."

She looked as if she would retch at any moment, so Gareth rapped abruptly on the roof. Seconds later the horses slowed and came to a halt. As soon as the doors opened, Faith bolted from the coach, leaving Gareth to stare curiously after her. Funny, he thought, he'd never imagined he would see Faith bolt anywhere. Mostly she seemed to glide from place to place.

Faith slipped into a grove of elm trees without looking back at the coach. She walked until she was sure she wouldn't be seen, then turned and crept carefully back until she could just make out Gareth's conveyance. Nobody had followed to be sure she was all right, she saw thankfully. Gareth was still standing near the door, staring at the grove of trees.

For a moment it seemed his eyes met hers, and Faith shrank back involuntarily. She leaned against a tree trunk and for the second time that day counted to one hundred. Then, carefully, she peered at the carriage again. Gareth was pacing alongside the road, looking like a thundercloud. Faith smiled to herself and smugly counted backward from one hundred.

When she reached zero, she straightened from the tree trunk upon which she leaned and smoothed her skirts. Carefully, she pulled a couple strands of hair from the sedate chignon she'd fashioned that morning.

Satisfied, she sauntered slowly out of the woods and back up to the waiting coach.

## *Eighteen*

**I**t was nearly midnight and raining when they finally pulled up in front of the caretaker's cottage at Rothmere. Gareth climbed out unassisted and glanced back inside at his sleeping wife. He turned to the dripping footman and put a finger to his lips, indicating they would leave Faith to sleep for the time being.

Golden light glowed from the windows on each side of the door to the cottage. Gareth ran toward their beckoning warmth, his shoulders hunched against the chill downpour.

The outriders he'd sent ahead had done their jobs well. A fire had been started in the cozy fireplace, and a small pot of soup hung steaming from an iron hook above the flames. He looked through the open door to the only other room in the cottage: a small bedchamber that was as neat as he'd left it. He regarded the comfortable bed he'd thought to share with his wife, then turned bitterly away. It would likely be a good while before he slept in that bed.

He swept his eyes around both of the two small rooms he'd considered "cozy" until now. He wondered what his bride would think of her new living quarters, accustomed as she was to living in luxury. The furnishings, which had once seemed more than adequate, now looked shabby, and he knew that the cottage would feel much smaller when shared by two people—especially when those two people could hardly stand being in the same room. He turned back to the fire and stared pensively into the dancing flames, dreading the thought of waking his wife to more disappointment.

Something was tickling her hand.

Slowly, Faith woke up, wrinkling her nose in confusion at her surroundings. Distant thunder rumbled, making her aware of the pounding rain on the roof. She looked around for Gareth and realized the carriage was no longer moving. He was not even in the vehicle.

Her hand was tickled again. This time, the sensation moved up her arm in a decidedly skittering fashion. In sudden dread, Faith looked down and saw the large brown spider making its leisurely way across her wrist.

With a bloodcurdling scream, Faith brushed the creature from her arm and leapt for the door. She wrestled frantically with the catch on the door handle, but wasn't able to open it. The skin on her back crawling, she pounded, desperately calling for a footman, and pushed heavily against the door with her shoulder. Right then, it opened from outside. Faith fell headlong from the vehicle. She felt a sudden, burning pain as her cheek scraped the edge of the door, then her head struck a rock on the ground and everything went blessedly black.

The muffled scream startled Gareth from his reverie in front of the fire. Cursing under his breath, he ran to the front door and wrenched it open. The steady rain had strengthened into a cold downpour. He could just make out the shapes huddled near the ground by the coach, and with an awful sense of dread he plunged into the torrent and ran the few feet to the vehicle. Impatiently, he pushed the footmen aside. His wife lay crumpled in the mud.

The worst fear he'd ever known quaked through him. He knelt in the puddle next to her unmoving form. "Faith!" He felt quickly at her neck for a pulse and breathed a sigh of relief when he found it. Gathering her gently into his arms, he stood and carried her limp body into the house.

"Go get the doctor," he called to the footman. He crossed the room in three long strides and gently laid Faith on the sofa.

"You," he ordered, pointing to the first of several servants who had begun arriving. "Get some water boiling. Find me something to use as a bandage, then warm some bricks and wrap them in flannel for the bed." He turned back to the sofa and knelt beside Faith. "Somebody find me a blanket."

Her eyes hadn't opened, and Gareth now saw the long scratch oozing blood on her right cheek. Knowing the scratch alone wouldn't have caused her to lose consciousness, he gingerly began running his hands through her wet hair and found what he sought. On the right side of her skull, up near the crown, was a swelling lump. He gently pressed her scalp around the contusion, wincing as he did so, and looked at his hand. It was wet, but thankfully only with the rain that had soaked her hair, not blood.

Without warning, Faith began shivering violently. Gareth looked over at the servant who was placing bricks on the fire. “Help me move this sofa closer to the hearth,” he said. Quickly, the man complied.

When the sofa was warmly situated, Gareth began working on getting his wife out of her wet clothes. He struggled with the catch on her soaked cape, cursing under his breath and finally breaking it when the dratted thing wouldn’t cooperate. He pushed the cape back and grimaced. The gown she wore fastened in the back. Carefully, he rolled his wife against him. She moaned softly but gave no other indication that she knew what was happening. Nestling her face against his chest, Gareth clumsily undid the frustrating row of tiny buttons, then eased the garment off her shoulders and worked it down the rest of her body.

Her shivering was growing worse, so Gareth quickly slipped off her ruined shoes, scooped her into his arms, and carried her into the bedroom. Carefully he shifted most of her weight to one arm, reaching down to turn back the coverlet and linen sheets. As tenderly as he was able, Gareth laid Faith on the warm bed, then straightened and took a step back. His heart caught as he looked down at her—and then, to his horror, he felt the unwelcome stirrings of arousal.

She looked like a fragile angel against the snowy white bedclothes, her face so pale that her closed eyelids seemed nearly translucent. The scratch on her cheek stood out red and angry against the delicacy of her features. Her hair lay in soaked disarray across the pillows, its normal luster diminished by rain and mud.

She frowned, her eyebrows drawn tightly together in unconscious reaction to the throbbing of her head. But it wasn’t the marred beauty of her face that made Gareth’s heart pound. His eyes dropped below her neck and moved down her body—a body made impossibly alluring because it was covered only by the thin muslin of her chemise. That wet material clung to her curves, emphasizing the shape normally hidden by her conservative dresses and gowns.

Horried by his body’s reaction to his injured wife, Gareth quickly turned away. With purposeful intent, he walked across the bedchamber to the wardrobe that stood in the corner. There, he whisked open the doors and pulled out the first shirt he saw. It was made of soft white lawn, with billowy sleeves and a wide neckline that would allow it to be slipped easily

over her head. Best of all, it had no buttons or studs that would need to be fastened or unfastened. He clenched his teeth and returned to the bed.

Carefully Gareth lifted Faith's legs and rolled off her wet stockings. He dropped them on the floor beside the bed and took a deep breath. His eyes mostly averted, he carefully slid the chemise up her bare legs to the tops of her thighs. Gently, he lifted her hips from the bed and slid the garment under her backside and past her torso, bunching it under her arms. Lifting first one arm and then the other, he eased them carefully through the armholes and gingerly pulled her to a sitting position. With an arm around her back for support, he pulled the offending shift over her head and dropped it with the stockings onto the floor.

He was just settling his shirt over her head when he heard the door in the other room open, letting the sounds of the steady wind and falling rain into the cottage. Gently he laid Faith back on the pillows and pulled the coverlet up, then turned to greet the village doctor.

Dr. Matthew Meadows had become friends with the new marquess during the previous summer. Gareth had insisted upon helping with the restoration of his new estate, and as a result had suffered numerous injuries that required the young doctor's assistance. After a time, Dr. Meadows had simply begun stopping at Rothmere on a regular basis to check on his regular patient.

"Well, your lordship, what have you broken this time? An arm? Your head?" The physician looked Gareth up and down. "You appear to be in appallingly good health to require my services in this ungodly weather."

Gareth smiled grimly. "Actually, Meadows, I seem to have broken my wife."

The good-natured grin vanished from the doctor's face. "You aren't married," he said, walking past Gareth to look at the unconscious figure on the bed. He sucked in his breath at the sight of the pale, fragile beauty nearly swallowed by the covers, her exquisite features marred only by a long scratch on her cheek. She was trembling with cold, he noticed, and automatically placed a hand on her brow to see if she was feverish. Turning back to Gareth, he couldn't help the expression of wary curiosity on his face. "Why is her hair wet?"

"She fell while getting out of my coach," the marquess answered. "I carried her inside and got her out of her wet clothes."

Dr. Meadows looked skeptical. “She’s not unconscious from that scratch on her face and some rain...” He turned back to Faith and opened his bag.

“She also hit her head on a rock.”

“How long ago?”

Gareth lifted his hands in a defeated gesture. “An hour, maybe,” he offered.

Dr. Meadows grunted and began feeling Faith’s head. Gareth paced for a moment, finally retreating to a chair in the corner while his wife was being examined. After a few moments, Dr. Meadows turned around and beckoned him to follow into the other room. After a lingering glance at the still form on the bed, Gareth complied.

The doctor was about to seat himself on the sofa when Gareth strode into the room. “That’s wet,” he warned. “Brandy?” he asked as he poured himself a glass of port. Matthew moved to the driest part of the sofa and nodded. Gareth poured it and handed it to the doctor, then set his port on the mantel and turned to face his friend.

“She’ll be fine, my lord,” Matthew pronounced, but held up a warning finger. “If,” he stressed, “she doesn’t end up with a fever.”

Gareth stiffened, the momentary relief on his face fading. “I take it you feel there maybe a good chance of that?”

Matthew shrugged. “She is injured, as well as having been cold and wet for some time, and this cottage is rather drafty. Keep her warm, especially her feet.” He swallowed his brandy and stood. “And send for me if you have need, my lord.”

Gareth nodded then stood to walk the other man out. He watched as the young doctor’s carriage pulled away into the stormy night, closed the door, and leaned his head against it. After a moment he straightened, took a deep breath, and went back into the bedroom to watch over his sleeping wife.



## Nineteen

Faith realized she was awake before she opened her eyes, but hovered for a time in that gray area between oblivion and awareness. There was something bothering her, something she needed to recall. She thought for a moment longer, then gave up. All of the images in her mind seemed blurry.

Cautiously, she tried to open her eyes but found them strangely heavy lidded. She frowned as she realized the whole right side of her head hurt. The more she focused, the worse the pain became. She tried to reach up with her hand, but was curiously unable even to lift it from the bed. More frightened by the bewildering weakness than by the pain in her head, she unknowingly whimpered in dismay.

The small sound and the attempt to move the hand Gareth held awakened him, seated as he was beside the bed in a comfortable chair he'd moved there for that very purpose two nights before. Dr. Meadows had sent a woman from the village to tend Faith during the day, and he stopped in to see her himself every afternoon, but at night there was only Gareth. And the longer her husband sat with her still, silent form, the guiltier he felt about her condition.

Logic and reason told him that her accident had not been his fault, but a persistent, nagging little voice in the back of his mind kept popping up with reminders.

*You left her alone in the carriage, it accused.*

*She was sleeping and I didn't wish to disturb her, he argued back.*

*She should have been safe, warm, and dry in your London town house,* persisted the voice.

Gareth had no argument for that unequivocal truth. He'd finally fallen asleep in his chair and dozed fitfully for nearly an hour before Faith stirred.

His eyes flew open. "Faith?" He leaned forward urgently.

"Gareth? I'm so tired," she whispered. She tried lifting her hand again, but it still seemed oddly numb.

“Shh, princess.” He smoothed the hair back from her face. “The doctor gave you laudanum for the pain. You’re just a bit groggy.” He rubbed his thumb gently back and forth across the soft skin of her cheek.

“Stay with me, please,” she murmured. She turned her face into his palm and drifted back to sleep.

A fierce feeling of protective tenderness surged through Gareth, shocking him with its intensity. He looked down at her, struck by the expression of tranquility on her pale face. He tried to fight the feeling, reminding himself that this was the same woman who had scorned him, who had married him and contrived to keep him out of her bed. But she was also the woman he’d waltzed with in the moonlight, who had shyly responded with awakening ardor to his caresses in Amanda Lloyd’s gazebo.

The woman who had trapped him.

The woman who had captured his heart.

She tightened her hand in his and sighed. And in that instant Gareth’s residual anger at her machinations melted away. She’d wanted time to be sure that their marriage was right. He smiled to himself. This accident should give him the time he needed to prove everything to her.

Faith opened her eyes slowly and cautiously, then widened them in surprise as she looked around. It was dark outside the one window in the room she occupied, but she could see fairly well by the light of a crackling fire and the moonlight that streamed in through the spotless glass. The room was small but cozy, furnished only with the bed she lay in, a large wardrobe in the corner, and a comfortable chair pulled near her side. She looked at that chair and frowned, bothered by a shadowy memory that wouldn’t quite coalesce.

The fire snapped and popped suddenly, and Faith turned her head toward the sound. Surprised, she saw that Gareth had come into the room. He was bent down in front of the hearth, a poker in one hand and a long-handled spoon in the other. She smiled at the domestic little scene and tried to push herself into a sitting position. As soon as she did, however, her head began pounding. A wave of dizziness washed over her. She settled back on her pillows, unable to suppress a groan of pain.

Gareth heard the small sound and moved quickly to her side. “Faith?”

She waited for the pounding to subside and cautiously opened an eye. Gareth stood over her, still holding both the spoon and the poker. She managed a wan smile. "I suppose," she whispered weakly, "you're here to put me out of my misery with that poker." Her eyes moved to the dripping spoon. "Or did you mean for me to die slowly, my lord?"

It took Gareth a second to realize she was making a joke about his cooking. He smiled softly, charmed by the quick wit she displayed despite her injury and the medication. "Actually, I'm glad you've awakened. I was unsure of which tool I should use to stir the soup and hoped to ask your opinion."

That quip earned him another smile, but it didn't last long; Faith was already tiring. "My head hurts," she murmured.

"You fell from the carriage the night we arrived," he explained.

Faith closed her eyes and wrinkled her forehead. "We're married," she recalled.

Gareth's heart jumped. "Guilty, I'm afraid."

Somehow, that odd statement penetrated her sleep-fogged mind. She opened her eyes and looked up at him somberly. "We began rather badly, didn't we?"

Gareth nodded and sat beside her on the bed. He leaned the fire poker against the chair and took her hand. "I'd like to begin again. If that's all right with you."

Faith bit her lip and nodded once, then winced in pain.

Gareth stood. "We'll talk in the morning. For now, let me get you some soup, and then you can go back to sleep." He smiled down at her for a second, picked up the poker, and moved back to the fireplace.

When he came back with a bowl of the steaming soup, she was already fast asleep.

The sun was streaming through the open window when Faith awoke the next morning. She thought for a moment that she was in Pelthamshire in her own bed, for in London she never awoke to the sound of early-morning birdsong. Within seconds, however, she remembered exactly where she was and with whom.

She recalled their brief conversation in the night. The warmth she'd seen in his eyes after the tension of the first two days of their marriage was a welcome relief. She fervently hoped that he'd meant what he'd said about starting over, for that was precisely what she wanted to do.

Gingerly, she pushed herself to a sitting position. The sharp ache in her head had subsided to an occasional painful twinge. She pushed back the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed before she remembered that it was entirely possible that she was not alone in the small house. She leaned forward, listening intently for a moment for sounds from the other room. When she didn't hear anything, she stood.

Her legs were still a bit weak from the days in bed without much sustenance, but seemed to be operating just fine. She looked down at the shirt she was wearing and realized for the first time that Gareth must have undressed her. Although she was alone, the thought made a hot blush steal across her face.

She leaned against the post at the end of the bed and looked across the room at the wardrobe, hoping the few items she'd packed were inside. Slowly she walked across the room and opened the doors. The two dresses she'd brought were there, hanging all the way to the left in front of a row of neatly washed and brushed items of Gareth's. She reached out and tentatively touched the sleeve of one of the shirts, feeling oddly as though she was invading his privacy. She ran the back of her hand lightly down the row of clothes, then stopped when she recognized the last item to the right. It was the jacket he'd worn at their wedding.

She reached out and slid the garment of jet-black superfine off the wooden hanger. She remembered where she'd last seen it, tossed angrily across the foot of the bed at the inn where they'd spent their wedding night. A sudden wave of regret washed through her, and she hugged the garment to her cheek. It smelled like Gareth, clean and woodsy, with just a hint of tobacco. She slipped it on and wrapped her arms around herself.

Gareth had been almost asleep in front of the fire in the other room when he heard Faith get up and pad quietly across the floor. Afraid her legs were still too weak to support her, he leapt up and went to the doorway of the bedchamber. The sight that greeted him made him catch his breath: Faith

stood across the room, in front of the open doors of the wardrobe, clad only in his white shirt, her long slim legs exposed to his gaze from midthigh to the floor. Her hair was unbound, falling in a glorious golden tumble to the middle of her back. A small smile touched her lips as she reached into the wardrobe. When he saw what she pulled out, he felt his heart constrict.

She stood for a moment, staring at the jacket he'd worn on their wedding day. Then, as he watched, she brought it close, rubbed her cheek on the material, and buried her face in it. After a moment, she held it up again, her head tilted to one side as if in deep thought. She slipped her arms into the overlarge garment and wrapped them around herself. Gareth leaned against the doorframe, thoroughly enjoying the small scene unfolding before him.

Faith bowed from the waist to an invisible partner, then spoke, deepening her voice in an obvious attempt to sound like Gareth. "Miss Ackerly, would you care to dance?" She stepped to the other side and sank into a curtsy. "But of course, my lord, I'd be honored—" She broke off abruptly as she rose from her curtsy and finally saw Gareth. Her face colored hotly and her hands fell to her sides.

"M-my lord," she stammered and drew herself up to stand with as much dignity as she could muster. "I thought you were out."

He smiled and straightened. "I'm glad I wasn't," he returned, his voice deep and resonant, sending chills skittering up her spine.

Faith looked down and started to remove his jacket, then realized that the shirt beneath was a great deal more revealing. Instead, she pulled it together in front. "I was just getting dressed, my lord."

Gareth raised a brow. "A pity," he commented. Then, to her relief, he turned away. "Mrs. MacAvoy has left a fortifying lunch of cold chicken and fresh bread, if you're interested," he added over his shoulder as he left the room.

Faith waited until she was sure he'd gone and yanked down the first gown she touched and dressed rapidly. Her pulse beat erratically as she did, but she wasn't sure if it was from embarrassment at being caught going through Gareth's things or from her reaction to the way he'd looked at her.

She reached around to try and deal with the three buttons on the back of the dress, her face burning anew. He'd looked at her so oddly, and she'd

stood there like a complete dolt, the sleeves of his jacket hanging well past her fingertips, the lawn shirt billowing almost to her knees.

She finally conquered the last button and turned back to the wardrobe, hoping to find her shoes and stockings, but found neither. She bit her lip in consternation and shrugged. Gareth had only a few moments ago caught her in nothing but his shirt and jacket. She saw no reason why she couldn't also have luncheon with him in her bare feet.

She walked out of the bedroom and into a small cozy area filled with the most comfortable-looking furnishings she'd ever seen. Gareth had placed a large linen cloth on the floor and arranged several cushions for her to sit on. Touched by the care he'd taken with the simple fare, she smiled softly and looked around, biting her lip when she didn't see Gareth. She thought back to the animosity that had flourished between them before her accident. Had he left her to eat alone, unable to abide her company after all?

The door opened. Gareth pushed it wide and propped it ajar. He turned and saw Faith standing across the room, a hesitant smile on her face. "I thought I'd let the outside in," he explained, gesturing to the doorway with a hand that clutched a bunch of wildflowers.

"For me?" Faith smiled with surprise and pleasure.

Gareth walked across the room to hand the flowers to his wife, feeling like an awkward boy with his first crush. "I'm afraid I haven't much of a garden," he apologized when she took them and looked down.

Faith lifted her face swiftly. "Oh, Gareth, no! These are perfect." She plucked a glass from the tray Mrs. MacAvoy had prepared, and arranged the flowers in it, then knelt and set the glass in the center of the blanket. She looked up at him over her shoulder. "See?" Her face glowed with happiness. "They make a lovely centerpiece."

Gareth stared at the beautiful girl kneeling next to the flowers and privately thought she would make a far lovelier one, but wisely held his tongue. He didn't want to frighten her, didn't want to apply too much pressure. Instead, he busied himself setting out the food while Faith got settled on the cushions.

The simple meal, as it turned out, was delicious. They ate in companionable silence, and though Faith didn't consume a great deal, it was evident her appetite was improving. Already the color was coming

back into her face, and the sparkle had returned to her gray eyes, making them glint with silvery reflections from the dancing candlelight.

She set aside her plate when she was finished, staring at the flames in perplexed thought. When Gareth said he was bringing her to Rothmere, she'd assumed it was the name of the entailed estate that went with his title. She looked around at the rustic little two-room cottage. While perfectly lovely, it was certainly not the home she knew the ton pictured for the Marquess of Roth.

She glanced at her husband's profile, remembering all the gossip about the estate he was supposedly renovating and the vast fortune said to have come with his title. Her heart went out to him. It was probably all he could do to keep the town house in London for appearance's sake.

Another thought occurred to her. She bit her lip and looked down, wondering if she would have to keep house and cook. In Pelthamshire, each of the girls had been given light and easy chores when they were growing up, so she felt rather confident that she could manage the cleaning. When it came to cooking, however, Faith was fairly certain she would be a dismal failure.

When she looked up she found Gareth watching her intently. She gave him a hesitant smile. "My lord..." she began.

"Gareth."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I wish you would always call me Gareth," he said, then explained. "I haven't been a 'my lord' all that long, you know."

"All right," she said, and began again. "Gareth, I would like very much to do my part to help out around here."

He gave her a steady look. "Right now, princess, your part is to simply get well."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I think if I rest this afternoon, I should be able to manage dinner for us."

"You don't have to do that," he said, but Faith held up a hand.

"I insist," she said. "Now help me up and I'll go rest for a couple of hours. Will you please wake me for tea?"

Gareth stood and held out a hand. With a last sweet smile she took the offered help, allowed him to assist her to her feet, and left the room. Gareth just watched her go, a bemused expression on his face.

## Twenty

Faith hummed happily as she dried the last plate and set it on the shelf at the far end of the room. She tried lifting the tub of wash water to take and pour outside but found she was still too weak. She looked over her shoulder and saw Gareth just coming in from the other room.

“My lord,” she began, then remembered. “Gareth,” she corrected, blushing a bit. The way he was looking at her made her feel both flattered and flustered. “Could you help me lift this?”

He set the book he was carrying down on the table and walked over. Without a word, he lifted the heavy tub and carried it out of doors. She heard the water splash as he dumped it. He came back inside, closed the door, and gave her a steady look.

“It’s time we talked.”

Faith felt her heart leap. “Yes,” she agreed. She spread the cloth she’d used to dry the dishes on the back of a chair. Nervously, she smoothed it so it would dry evenly, then messed it up again by gripping the chair.

Gareth watched, his heart tugging at the little gestures that betrayed his wife’s trepidation. He would have to win her slowly, he mused with a wry smile, reluctantly amused by the irony of the fact that he was now perfectly willing to abide by the agreement he’d struck with her sister.

When Faith delicately cleared her throat, shaking him from his momentary thoughts, he walked across the room and moved the comfortable overstuffed chair a bit nearer the fire. “Sit here,” he offered. “The night air grows chilly.”

Faith sat on the edge of the chair and watched warily as her husband settled on the couch. Tension, almost audible, crackled through the air until she could no longer stand it. “Shall I go first?”

Gareth sat back and crossed his legs. “By all means.”

Faith took a deep breath. “I should have been honest with you as soon as I discovered you were angry,” she began. She paused a moment, considered her words, and plunged ahead. “I didn’t think you’d believe me,



and then after a while, I became angry, too.” She lowered her voice almost to a whisper, and Gareth had to lean forward to catch her next words. “I didn’t ask Grace to speak for me.”

“I know that, princess.”

Her head snapped upright. “But you were so upset—,” she began.

“And stubborn and hurt and stupid,” he agreed, cutting in. “It took me a couple of days to realize, but I knew it was out of character for you to do such a thing. You’d have come to me yourself.”

“Grace only meant to help,” Faith explained hastily.

“I know, princess.”

Faith was silent, her mind spinning to come up with a logical way out of this uncomfortable situation. After only a moment, she gave up. “So what do we do now?”

Gareth smiled wryly. “Suppose we didn’t get married.”

“But we did,” Faith pointed out.

“All right, then. Suppose we never went out to Amanda’s gazebo that night.”

Faith drew her eyebrows together, less inclined to interrupt. “Go on.”

“Where would we be?”

Faith’s mind flashed back to the ride in the park they’d taken the day he’d presented her with the bouquet tree. “You’d be courting me, and I’d be discouraging you.”

Gareth leaned back and laughed. “Perhaps. How about we start there, then?” He quirked an eyebrow. “I’ve always enjoyed a challenge.” Standing, he gallantly held out an arm and eyed her with a droll expression.

Faith laughed. “What are you doing?”

“I’m escorting you home, Miss Ackerly.” He tipped his head toward the bedroom and winked.

Faith caught his playful mood and stood also, placing a hand lightly on his arm. Solemnly, they strolled around the couch to the door. There, Gareth turned and brought her hand to his lips.

“Thank you for a lovely evening, Miss Faith.”

She stifled a smile and sank into a graceful curtsy.

“May I call upon you tomorrow morning?”

Faith nodded regally, a hint of laughter in her gray eyes, and turned to walk into the bedroom.

She went through her normal bedtime preparations thoughtfully. The day had been so pleasant, so normal. She smiled softly, looked toward the door, and wondered what her husband was thinking. As she turned down the covers and slipped into bed, she knew a small feeling of regret. With a sigh, she reached for the unused pillow next to hers, wrapped her arms around it, and tucked it under her chin.

Strangely, she suddenly felt quite alone.

Long after the scuffling sounds of Gareth preparing for bed in the other room ended, Faith lay sleepless in the large bed, images of her husband filtering through her mind. Every time she reached for sleep, another vision would pop up and disturb her anew. She closed her eyes only to see Gareth bowing to her on a moonlit balcony or comforting her in the hedge maze. Or he was lifting his head after kissing her, his eyes dark with a need she didn't fully understand.

Faith reached up blindly, grabbed her pillow, and smashed it over her face. But still the thoughts paraded faster and faster: Gareth, grim as he spoke his vows, then rising nude from the bed at the inn. Gareth, bent over her bed with worry, a fire poker in one hand, a dripping soup spoon in the other.

"Bloody hell," she muttered, and sat up. The moonlight streamed in the window, bathing the room in a soothing, silvery light, at odds with the turmoil inside Faith's head. Quietly she got out of bed, crept to the doorway, and peeked around the side into the other room. She could hear Gareth's breathing but couldn't see over the back of the couch. She tiptoed closer and peered over the edge.

He was sound asleep. Slumber lent a boyish cast to his handsome face, melting away minute lines from the worries of the day. He was smiling slightly, as though his dreams were pleasant. Faith felt the corners of her own mouth tug upward in response.

He slept bare chested, the firelight playing across his skin, casting shadows and highlights upon his shoulders and midsection. His skin was lightly bronzed, and Faith felt a sudden urge to reach down and touch him. She bit her lip and glanced at his face. He hadn't moved.

Hesitantly, she reached down and lightly touched his stomach with her index finger. The blanket lay at an angle across his lower abdomen, and Faith had another wayward recollection of the one time she'd seen him completely unclothed. Did he always sleep that way? She looked at her finger, resting lightly on his stomach, then watched in disbelief as it seemed to move of its own accord down to the blanket. Cautiously, she slipped the digit under the edge of the covering and began to lift, glancing briefly back up at his face—

She started in shock and dropped the blanket as if it were a hot coal. Gareth was wide awake.

Thoroughly embarrassed, Faith gasped and took a step back. Gareth pinned her in place with his eyes, his expression hungry, and she found herself unable to look away.

“Faith,” he said in a sleep-roughened voice, and held out a hand.

She hesitated a bare moment, then put her hand in his. She felt that odd, tingling thrill shoot up her arm as his fingers closed around hers. He tugged her closer to the back of the couch and sat up, his eyes locked on hers. “Gareth,” she whispered back.

He let go of her hand and put both of his hands on her waist. Effortlessly, he pulled her up and over the back of the couch, nestling her securely on his lap. Faith slipped both arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. Gareth stroked the tumbled mass of golden curls that cascaded down her back.

“Can’t sleep, princess?”

Wordless, she shook her head and pressed an ear to his chest, loving the comforting warmth, the rough feel of the hair against her cheek, the sound of his steady heartbeat.

“Would you like to tell me what’s on your mind?”

“No,” she whispered, though she knew that was a lie. “I mean...yes,” she hesitantly amended.

Gareth smiled down at the top of her head. “I’m all ears, sweetheart.”

Faith reveled in the deep baritone of his voice rumbling against her ear. She bit her lip uncertainly. It had always been her way to work things out alone, to calmly and logically assess the facts of a given situation, and then to act upon her assessment. Now, for the first time, she was confronted with

something that required she work in tandem with someone else—with the man to whom she had pledged her life. The man who held her in his arms.

Gareth patiently waited out her silence, allowing Faith to grapple with her thoughts, feeling instinctively that she was on the verge of surrender. He had to let her take that step alone. After a few moments, she began speaking.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said in a halting voice, “because...” She paused, and Gareth held his breath. Her next words were said in a voice so low that he wasn’t sure he heard correctly. “Because I was thinking of you.”

His heart began pounding with desire, but he said nothing. Softly, he put a finger under her chin and tilted her face up to his. Her gray eyes were huge and frightened. “Tell me what scares you, princess,” he whispered.

A wistful expression crept into their silver depths, momentarily chasing away the fear. She sighed. “Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve wanted to be married. To preside over my own household, to have children.” She stopped, bit her lip. “To be a wife.”

“You are a wife. You’re *my* wife.”

Faith dosed her eyes, then slowly opened them and looked at Gareth, vulnerability shining from their depths. “Your brother adores Amanda. Trevor cherishes Grace beyond all else. I always intended...*hoped*, that is...” Her voice trailed off and she looked down.

“That you would marry for love?”

Slowly she nodded, then swiftly looked up, her expression earnest. “I know it isn’t fashionable, but I want more than balls and emeralds, gowns and allowances. I didn’t grow up rich, but I grew up happy, and happiness is far more important to me than money.” Faith looked around the small room and confided, “I was actually pleased to find out that you live in a small home, that all the talk of your vast fortune was gossip and speculation.”

Gareth saw the sincerity in her face and felt something wrench inside him. He wanted nothing more than to protect and coddle and spoil this young woman he had married, to fulfill her wishes for the mere recompense of her smile. With almost any other girl, such a task would have been easy. Jewels, gowns, pretty horses, the comforts of money. This girl wanted love. And she had very nearly said she didn’t think she would ever have that with him.

He cleared his throat. "Don't you think you could love me, Faith?" He smiled to hide the importance of her answer.

Faith bit her lip again. Gareth had asked his question in a rather offhand voice, and his smile was as warm as ever, but something in his eyes told her that her next words meant more than he cared to admit. She pushed herself up off his chest and sat upright, her legs still across his lap. Not entirely certain how to answer, she tilted her head and considered. What she already felt for this man was strong. But what was it? Was it the beginnings of love?

Gareth watched his wife closely as she sat, her brow furrowed, biting her lip. The silence between them grew. He tilted his head in the same direction as hers, leaned forward, and tried to catch her eye. He bit back a chuckle. She looked exactly like a little girl unsure if she was in trouble or not. She raised her eyebrows and chanced a look back at him out of the corner of her eye. At that, Gareth could no longer hold back his laughter.

Faith looked indignant. "It isn't funny, my lord!" she said in a reproving voice. "I was trying to find a way to spare your feelings."

Still chuckling, he settled back against the pillows, pulling her down and nestling her in front of him. "Don't worry about my feelings, princess," he whispered, drawing the blanket over them. "*You will* learn to love me."

With a content little sigh, Faith wriggled a bit to get comfortable and dosed her eyes. Within moments she had drifted off to sleep in her husband's arms.

## Twenty-one

Gareth awoke alone on the couch and listened for a moment. All was still, silent. He could sense, even without getting up to go look in the other room, that Faith was not in the house. Rolling onto his back, he smiled broadly, contemplating the deep pleasure he was going to take in wooing his wife. He laced his fingers behind his head, pictured long walks in the sun, picnics by a shady brook, and quiet evenings spent reading by the fire.

Eventually, his thoughts turned to the fact that she had no idea of his fortune. A small pang of guilt struck him. Faith hadn't just resigned herself to being a country wife to an impoverished aristocrat; she was almost *embracing* the role. And though he certainly hadn't meant to mislead her into that way of thinking, the knowledge that she did think thus was incredibly endearing. It charmed him that although she did not love him, she hadn't married him for his money. He grinned. The look on her face when she realized the truth would be priceless.

Gareth relaxed for another moment, then sat up and swung his feet to the floor, the blanket draped carelessly across his lap. He ran a hand through his tousled hair, stopped, and looked toward the open window, smiling as Faith's modulated voice reached his ears. She was talking to someone—a man—and they were coming closer. A moment later, he recognized the voice of Dr. Matthew Meadows.

He contemplated making a run for the bedroom and then realized he'd never make it in time. Quickly he rearranged the blanket to cover his naked midsection and sat back just as the door opened.

"I think he's still asleep, Dr. Meadows," Faith was saying in a low voice as she opened the door. "But I'm sure he'll be happy to see you." She took several steps into the room and stopped dead in her tracks when she saw Gareth sitting and smiling at them. The basket of cut wildflowers she carried landed on the floor with a thud.

Matthew walked in right behind her. He looked curiously over her head, registered the fact that Gareth was obviously nude beneath the

blanket, and glanced down at Faith, who was blushing. Silence stretched between them all, grew thick in the small room. Matthew finally cleared his throat to remind his hosts that he was there.

Faith visibly jumped in reaction to the unexpected sound. She mumbled something about needing to cut some more flowers and began backing toward the door. She stepped on Matthew's foot, stammered an apology, and pushed past, elbowing him in the midsection in the process. Her blush deepening visibly, she fled the cottage, quite forgetting both the basket and the scissors with which she'd been snipping her prizes.

Matthew watched her go with a puzzled expression, then turned and quirked an eyebrow at the marquess, who smiled broadly.

"Good morning, Meadows," Gareth said pleasantly. He sat back comfortably on the couch and crossed his bare ankles.

Matthew smiled. "I believe you just frightened my patient away, my lord," he said.

Gareth chuckled. "Remember this day, Meadows," he said. "You are one of the few people in all of England ever to have seen my wife flustered."

The doctor sat down in the chair across from him. "Well. Now I find myself at loose ends. I actually came to ascertain how your wife was recovering from her bump on the head. I see the scratch on her cheek is healing nicely. She likely won't even have a scar." He looked over his shoulder at the door again. "Do you think she will come back in?"

Gareth shook his head with a smile. "My wife is no coward, but I believe she'll wait until you leave before she kills me."

Matthew nodded sagely. "Most prudent. No witnesses."

Gareth laughed. "Prudence," he stated, "is one of Faith's most endearing qualities."

The doctor propped one booted ankle on his knee and gave Gareth a probing look. "I knew you'd gone to London with vague thoughts of finding a wife, but I didn't expect you to accomplish it in such short order."

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "Well," he admitted, "as to that, Faith will be the first to tell you that she compromised me quite beyond recall."

Matthew snorted. "Somehow I doubt that." When Gareth smiled but didn't elaborate, Matthew waited a moment, then changed the subject. "How is reconstruction on Rothmere coming along?"

Gareth shrugged. "I haven't had a chance to make it up there yet. I was planning on walking up in the early afternoon with Faith." He frowned. "After I tell her the estate exists, that is."

Matthew looked incredulous. "Surely she doesn't think *this* is your home?"

Gareth looked a bit sheepish. "Actually, that's precisely what she thinks. I only realized she had that impression last night." He sobered as he thought again of how little they really knew about each other.

Matthew gave his aristocratic friend another long look and stood. "I have other patients I've promised to call upon this morning," he stated. "But I'm happy to have found the marchioness so well recovered."

Gareth started to stand, but Matthew waved him off. "I'll see myself out, thank you," he said with a pointed look at Gareth's blanket.

Gareth watched the physician leave, then got up and walked to the bedroom to get dressed. As he passed the open window, he heard the sudden sharp sound of a breaking twig and the scuffling sound of running feet. Smiling inwardly, he stepped over to the window and looked outside, although he already knew he wouldn't find anyone out there. Sure enough, all was quiet.

Two hours later, he was torn between worry and annoyance. Faith hadn't come back after he'd heard the twig snap at the window, although she had to know that Matthew had left. The window was on the same side of the house as the door, so she'd more than likely watched him leave and crept back to peek in and see what Gareth was doing.

His annoyance grew again, then abruptly waned. She probably knew he'd heard her at the window. Perhaps she was out there, embarrassed to come back in and face him. A sudden vision of Faith sitting outside on a rock, biting her lip, invaded his mind. A bit chagrined at his annoyance, Gareth walked out the front door to look for her.

Ignoring the drive that wound through the woods for nearly a mile and ultimately led to Rothmere, he opted instead to take a small path that ran along the edge of the woods to a small brook. There was a bridge there, and a small clearing. Gareth was fairly certain he would find Faith sitting there, fighting some small internal battle.



Three minutes after Gareth disappeared down the path, Faith walked out of the woods and back inside the small cottage. As soon as she entered, she felt the looming emptiness of the dwelling. Gareth wasn't there. She bent and picked up the basket of flowers she'd dropped on the floor earlier, fingered their forlorn petals, and sadly gathered the wilted things together and threw them away.

Feeling strangely morose, she looked around the small room, contemplating her reaction to being here by herself. Loneliness was a new feeling for Faith, who had always, even as a child, valued time spent in solitude. She walked toward the bedroom, trailing her fingers along the back of the couch where she'd slept with Gareth the night before.

As she entered the bedroom, she glanced at the unmade bed and found herself yawning. Suddenly, the rumpled covers looked very inviting, so with a sigh Faith kicked off her slippers and stepped out of her simple morning gown. Clad in only her chemise, she climbed into the bed and burrowed down into the softness, hugging a pillow to her chest.

She yawned once more, murmuring, "If I go to sleep, Gareth will be back sooner."

With that oddly comforting thought, she blinked once and drifted off.

Gareth returned to the house nearly an hour later, now genuinely worried. He'd combed the woods near the stream but had found no sign of Faith. He did find what looked like the remnants of a fire from a recent campsite and made a mental note to hire a man to patrol the grounds for trespassers.

He took a last look around the small clearing and jogged up the road to Rothmere. He didn't pass her on the way, however, and none of the men working on renovations to the estate remembered seeing a young blonde woman at any time that morning. He even climbed up and joined the roofers, hoping he would be able to see her from the greater height. He was able to make out the roof of the caretaker's cottage, nestled between the trees nearly a mile away, but his wife wasn't in sight.

Gareth climbed down and sent one of the workers to the village to locate Dr. Meadows. As the man set off at a run, Gareth began the easy jog back to the cottage to change into riding gear. His greatest fear was that her head injury had been worse than Matthew supposed, that she had wandered

off somewhere, entirely forgetting who or where she was. Gareth had heard of that happening and had seen men with similar injuries do incredibly odd things during his time in the war.

He reached the cottage and strode inside, tugging his shirttails out of his trousers on his way to the bedroom to change. He walked directly to the wardrobe, pulled out the first pair of breeches he saw, and selected a comfortable shirt to match. Reaching into the bottom of the wardrobe, he pulled out a pair of riding boots, tossed everything on a chair, and shrugged out of his shirt.

His mind was spinning. She'd probably wandered into the village, he told himself, and was perfectly safe in the bosom of some kindly family. Mentally cursing himself for not going there first, he grabbed his riding boots and headed for the bed, intending to sit on the edge while he changed.

He took two short steps and stopped. Instant relief flooded through him when he saw the slight form curled beneath the covers, her back turned toward him, her long golden hair spilling across the pillow and off the side of the bed. He took another step in her direction, then heard hoofbeats coming rapidly up the short drive from the direction of the village. Sighing, Gareth walked through the living room and stepped outside to find Matthew securing his horse to a post.

"What has happened?"

"It's fine now," Gareth replied. "I misplaced my wife for a time, but it appears she decided to come home while I was out looking for her.

Matthew gave Gareth an odd look. "And why did you summon me, your lordship? I'm a physician, not a Bow Street runner."

Gareth looked sheepish. "I thought her head injury might have caused her to become disoriented."

Matthew privately thought that the marquess himself seemed a tad disoriented, but wisely kept his thoughts to himself. "Where is she now?"

"Asleep in bed."

"Well, since I'm here and you frightened her off before I could examine her this morning, I suppose I'll have a look." The doctor followed Gareth inside and to the bedroom.

Faith had rolled onto her back while the men were talking outside, but she was still sound asleep. Matthew gingerly felt the much diminished lump on her head and ran a finger lightly across the almost-healed scratch on her

cheek. He tilted his head and leaned down to listen to her deep, even breathing. Gareth stood silently watching. Matthew looked at him and cocked his head toward the living room.

“She’s fine, your lordship,” the physician said in a low voice when they were in the other room. “The swelling is almost completely gone, there is no infection in the scratch on her cheek, she’s sleeping peacefully, and there appears to be no memory loss. I really don’t think you have anything further to worry about.” He grinned suddenly. “Unless you plan to climb on the roof again, as the man you sent told me you’ve already done. With your record of construction-related injuries, my lord, you’re lucky you didn’t fall and break your neck.”

Gareth smiled and walked him to the door. “The outdoor repairs to the manor are nearly finished. All the roofers are doing now is detail work on the eaves. Most of the remaining work is inside.”

“Well, I’ve no doubt you’ll manage to require my services even so,” said Matthew wryly. “Please give my regards to your wife when she wakes, my lord.”

Gareth watched his friend mount and ride off in the direction of the village, then turned to go inside. A flash of silver under one of the windows caught his eye. Curious, he walked over to get a closer look. It looked like a stud from a man’s shirt, so highly polished he knew it couldn’t have been there very long.

Gareth squatted and reached to pick it up, but froze. The ground beneath the window had just been turned in preparation for planting and was still damp and soft from the recent rains. Clearly outlined, just to the left of the window, was a man’s boot print. In the middle of it was a broken twig.

Gareth stood, the shirt stud in his hand, and scanned the trees surrounding the house, already knowing there would be nothing for him to see. He recalled the sound of the twig breaking he’d heard at the window that morning, a sound he’d attributed to Faith’s standing at the window looking in. He thought, too, of the abandoned camp in the woods near the stream. With a last glance into the woods, Gareth made a fist around the stud, went inside, and closed the door.

He carefully placed the stud on the mantel over the fireplace and quietly made his way back to Faith’s side. She hadn’t moved, so he pulled a

chair to the side of the bed and sat down to wait for her to awaken, his mind switching from the disturbing topic of the unexplained footprint to the disturbing topic of his marriage.

His eyes traveled the length of his wife's body beneath the covers. Somehow, things had gone badly for them from the beginning. His lips tightened as he thought about the first conversation they'd ever had, then softened into a smile as he recalled the waltz they'd shared on that moonlit balcony. Since that one shared moment, they'd continued their dance—but now they danced around one another like wary opponents in a fencing match.

Not anymore, Gareth silently resolved. One way or another, he would find a happy resolution.

## Twenty-two

**T**he felt him watching her, the weight of his regard dragging her from the depths of sleep. Usually slow to awaken, Faith was suddenly, instantly aware of her husband's presence. Happiness washed through her, and an unbidden smile reached her lips, but she kept her eyes closed a moment longer, unsure if she was dreaming or perhaps simply wishing.

Gareth watched her stir beneath the covers, saw the soft smile touch her lips, though she did not yet wake. He thought she must be dreaming, and wondered what she envisioned to bring such peace and joy to her face. His chest ached, for *he* wanted to put that smile there, to be the reason she found happiness. Swallowing hard, he looked down at the ground.

Just then, Faith opened her eyes and saw Gareth sitting there, his head quietly bowed. He was shirtless, she saw with surprise, but this time she didn't look away in embarrassment. Her eyes hungrily took in the muscular expanse of his chest with its crisp, curling dark hair and his broad shoulders that seemed as though they could bear the weight of the world. She ached, she found, to bury her face in his neck, to breathe in his scent, that warm, comforting scent she'd experienced both times she'd slept next to him.

She lifted her eyes to his face again and found him watching her. Their glances locked, hers hungry, his hopeful. And then, without a word, Faith held out her arms.

He was at her side in an instant, lifting and gathering her into him. She made a tiny sound, perhaps a gasp, and Gareth's mouth was on hers, and hers on his, tasting and feeling and caressing with rising need. He plunged a hand into her hair and eased her back down onto the bed, stretching out beside and above her, his mouth never leaving hers. He licked at her lower lip, and willingly she opened. His heart pounding, he deepened the kiss, his tongue tasting and tormenting, evoking.

Faith strained closer, aching to touch Gareth with every part of herself, needing him as she had never needed anything before. Her heart thudded in her chest with new and frightening feeling, and still she yearned for

something she could not name. All she knew was that she wanted to give herself up, to be swept away in this storm, to lose and to find herself in this man who was her husband. Something white-hot gathered deep within her. She opened her eyes and reached up with trembling fingers to cradle his face in her hands, touched her tongue to his.

Their kiss exploded. Gareth slanted his lips on hers, his tongue plunging in and out of her mouth with primitive abandon. Faith kissed him back, urgent, turning in toward his body, her legs tangling with his. When her knee slipped between his thighs, he caught his breath and pulled her more tightly against him, the evidence of his arousal becoming increasingly apparent.

His hand slipped from the side of her face to settle on the soft mound of her breast, her puckered nipple proudly nudging his palm through the thin material of her chemise. He ached to take that hard little morsel between his teeth, to nibble and suckle at it. He lifted his mouth from hers, intending to do just that, when she sighed and slipped her hands into his hair.

At her touch, Gareth remembered her innocence, and he slowed immediately, his lips descending once more to slide softly across her cheek to her ear. "Faith," he whispered. "Tell me what you want."

At the warmth of his breath on her flesh, Faith whimpered and settled even more closely against him. Gareth fought his raging desire and laced the fingers of one hand with hers, then slipped his head down to rest on her pillow, his eyes capturing hers and holding them.

"Tell me what you want," he repeated.

Faith caught her breath, her eyes a luminous silver. She bit her lip, her even white teeth a contrast to the bright pink color left by his kisses. She pulled their clasped hands up, softly kissed each of his fingertips, and spoke. "I want to be your wife," she said in an aching voice.

Gareth's heart slammed into his ribs at her words, and he caught his breath at the naked vulnerability and sincerity shining from her eyes. "I would like nothing more than to make you mine, princess," he said, his voice thick with emotion. For a moment, they simply looked at one another, and Gareth softly kissed her forehead. "But we need to have some things straightened out and understood between us first."

Faith nodded and waited for him to continue.

“To begin with,” he said, “this is not our home.”

Faith’s eyes softened. “I don’t care where we live, my lord,” she began, stopping when he placed a quieting finger on her lips.

“We have simply been staying here because my home has been uninhabitable up until this point.”

Faith’s curiosity got the better of her. “But who owns this house?”

Gareth raised a brow. “Well,” he said, “I do.”

She frowned.

“This is my caretaker’s cottage, Faith.”

A suspicious look was dawning on her face. “Where is the caretaker living?”

“I’ve yet to hire him.”

Faith looked troubled. “Gareth, I want to be your wife. Even if that means you cannot afford caretakers and stewards and servants.”

He fought back guilt. “Well, that’s just the thing I’ve been trying to tell you, princess.”

Comprehension dawned. Her face cleared and she narrowed her eyes in astute accusation. “You are frighteningly wealthy, aren’t you?” Her lips tightened as if she were suppressing anger, but irrepressible mirth was beginning to dance in her shining gray eyes.

He nodded soberly, though his lips twitched a bit. “I’m afraid so.”

She sighed. “I suppose I’ll be forced to live in some enormous, opulent ancestral mansion,” she continued.

“Do you think you can abide it, love?”

She nodded in mock resignation. “I suppose I can make do, my lord, if you promise not to drape me in obscenely expensive gowns and jewels.”

At that, Gareth finally did laugh, gathering her close to him once more. “I think, my princess, that I’d much rather see your obscenely expensive gowns draped across the floor of my bedchamber.”

That outrageous statement made Faith blush furiously and hide her face in his chest. Gareth stroked her hair a moment and suggested, “Would you like to go see your home, darling?”

He’d called her darling. Not princess. Faith’s heart gave a little flip at the endearment, and she nodded. “Yes, please,” she whispered. “Take me home, Gareth. To *our* home.”

## *Twenty-three*

Gareth took Faith's hand as they walked down the lane in companionable silence, enjoying the dappled shade and the late-spring afternoon. In many ways, it was as though everything had been renewed, that they were just now beginning to know one another. Faith mostly looked straight ahead, but occasionally she would cast a sidelong glance at her husband, and those fleeting glimpses filled her with pride. He was incredibly handsome, she admitted to herself, and bit her lip to hide a smile.

Gareth caught every look out of the corner of his eye and reveled in them. Once he turned his head to try and catch her at it, but she swiftly looked the other way, pretending an absorbed interest in the antics of a pair of sparrows. Suppressing a laugh, he tugged her close again and gave her a small squeeze around the shoulders.

Faith looked up at him, her eyes bright and happy. "How much farther?"

Gareth pointed. "Just around that bend," he said. "The drive splits and circles around to meet again in front of the house." He couldn't wait to see her first reaction to her new home.

But Faith had other plans. She knelt a moment and pretended to adjust her slipper, hiding the gleeful look in her eyes, while Gareth waited patiently at her side. He reached for her hand again when she stood, but she turned and evaded him, taking a couple backward steps away. She tossed him a jaunty smile. "Race you to the bend," she challenged, and took off without giving him a chance to respond.

Gareth stood still for a second, amazed by the unexpected spectacle of his normally sedate wife running down the lane with her hair streaming behind her, periwinkle skirts flying up around her knees. He gave a shout of laughter and gave chase, catching her just as she reached the bend in the lane. He swept her, laughing helplessly, up into his arms, spun her around once, and looked into her eyes, breathing hard.

"I love you," he said.



Faith gazed up at him, utterly speechless, but her eyes held a thousand words. The pounding of her heart had little to do with the unusual exertion. She laid a trembling hand on his chest.

Gareth was surprised to hear himself voice the words, but he didn't regret saying them. It was true, he thought to himself, and probably had been since the evening he'd held her in his arms and waltzed her down that balcony. Not wanting to force the feeling on her, however, he softly kissed her on the forehead above those luminous eyes, then set her down and turned her toward the breathtaking view of Rothmere. She gasped.

The two forks of the circular drive disappeared to wind through rows of evenly spaced birches and reappeared just in front of the house in the distance. Flowering trees dotted a wide expanse of neatly trimmed grass between where they stood and the manor. Two charming ponds with a small connecting stream lay near the center of lawn, a gazebo with a little dock on the edge of one, a lovely willow on the banks of the other, its branches dipping lazily into the water. A flagstone path led to a quaint little footbridge that arched over the gurgling stream.

With a smile, Gareth led Faith down the path toward the house, enjoying the look of dawning amazement on her face. Rothmere was truly a sight to behold, amazing him even now, though he'd seen it several times since renovations on the facade were completed. Every time he approached the mansion, he was filled with a tremendous sense of satisfaction.

Very few structural changes had been made to the original building, but the difference was nonetheless breathtaking. The deep gray stone had been scoured to clear it of the lichen and discolorations that had accumulated during the years of neglect. A wide set of shallow steps flanked by two tall evergreen trees led from the drive up to the front terrace. Additional sets of stairs curved up to the terrace at the left and the right. Gareth had ordered a new balustrade constructed, as the old one had been weathered and crumbling. The new one was made entirely of marble and polished to a high gloss.

The windows along the front of the house rose almost to the second story, were repeated on that level, and topped by high, curved panes on the third floor. Centered above the massive front door was a circular stained-glass window depicting the Roth seal of a falcon in flight under two crossed

swords. It had been done entirely in shades of gray and black, and was Gareth's personal contribution to an estate long without pride.

Faith stopped in the middle of the small bridge and turned to her husband with shining eyes. "Amanda told us you were seeing to the renovation of your estate, but I had no idea how beautiful it was, Gareth."

He smiled. "Ah, but it wasn't when I acquired it, love. What you see now is the result of many hours of hard labor. There's still a great deal to be done inside, but I had the staff rush to make as much of it as habitable as possible. I hope to move in within a few days."

Faith bit her lip. "I'm afraid I don't know a great deal about running an estate this size, my lord," she admitted.

Gareth bent and kissed her forehead. "Neither do I," he confided.

Suddenly, Faith felt a surge of happiness. She tugged on her husband's hand. "Take me inside," she said, looking like a little girl opening a present. "I would like to see our home." She pulled him across the cobbled drive and up the front steps to the door. "Do you have a butler yet?" Her smile held more than a hint of fun.

"I'm bringing Desmond from London," he replied, wondering at her dancing eyes and mischievous grin.

She turned the knob and peered inside briefly, then pushed Gareth through the opening. "*You* be Desmond," she said, then firmly pulled the door closed in his astonished face. She waited a moment, resolutely ignoring the fact that a couple of the gardeners had stopped working to stare.

Gareth opened the door and peeked out at her. She gave him an indignant look and hissed, "I didn't knock yet!" He promptly closed the door.

Faith raised her hand and knocked firmly.

Nothing happened.

She knocked again.

Still nothing.

She was just reaching for the doorknob when it was wrenched open from the inside. "Keep yer pants on, snapped Gareth. "I may be slow, but I ain't deaf."

Faith stared uncertainly. "Gareth?"

"I'm being Desmond," he whispered. "You'll love him," he added with a little wink.

Faith recovered her composure and stuck her nose in the air. "I'm here to see the Marquess of Roth," she informed him in an imperious voice.

"He ain't in," Gareth snarled.

Faith stepped out of character. "Yes he *is*," she corrected in a stage whisper. "You have to invite me in."

Gareth didn't miss a beat. "I'll let 'im know yer here, Miss...?"

"Ackerly. Miss Faith Ackerly."

"Well, come in, Miss Ackerly, even though yer not expected."

Faith stepped inside with regal grace, then abruptly dropped the charade and looked around in undisguised awe. "Gareth," she breathed, tilting her head back to look at the ceiling three stories above. "It's beautiful."

Gareth's face softened as he looked around with pride. "It's the first thing that has ever completely belonged to me," he said softly. "I know it's entailed, and will always stay with the Marquess of Roth, whoever he may be. That, however, is who I am at the moment, and this"—he spread wide his arms—"is what I've done."

Faith stepped up to him and pressed a soft kiss to his cheek. "*I* belong to you, my lord," she said in a quiet voice.

As she felt his arms close around her, it occurred to her that Gareth was leaving the renovation of Rothmere as his mark upon the world. He was improving his title—a title that would be handed down to the child she would someday bear for him.

The thought made her blush hotly. She kept her head down to hide her flaming cheeks as he led her through the various rooms of the house. She was so consumed with the direction her thoughts had taken, she barely heard him telling her the history associated with different objects throughout the estate.

Gareth watched his wife nod and smile with a distracted air during the tour, but she didn't comment. His heart fell a little each time she asked no questions and displayed little interest in the things that had become such a source of pride to him. He began to fear that she was humoring him—and not at all well. For that reason, when they passed servants busily working to

make the place habitable, despite the fact that he knew them all by name, Gareth didn't introduce his quiet bride to any of them.

By the time they reached the master bedchamber, a slow anger had begun to build inside him. Was she so much better than he that she could dismiss so easily all he had accomplished? He let go of Faith's hand and walked inside ahead of her.

"This is my room," he said curtly and strode to the doors that led to the bathing area that connected his chamber with hers. He walked through it and had almost reached Faith's chamber when he realized she was no longer behind him. Infuriated beyond reason, Gareth turned on his heel and stalked back into his bedchamber. He found Faith standing frozen, staring fixedly at the enormous bed that dominated the room, her cheeks flushed bright red. "Faith?"

Lost in thought, Faith didn't hear him say her name. She recalled her conversation with Grace about physical intimacy, and knew that when she moved into this home, Gareth would expect her to fulfill her marital obligation. She recalled the tender way he'd held and kissed her that afternoon. It didn't seem possible that something so wonderful could end up being painful, as Grace had said it might, the first time. Without warning, her mind flew back to her childhood, and she was once more lost in the maze with the spider, only this time, it wasn't the chambermaid's breast upon which Duncan was feeding...it was hers. She shuddered.

"It appears you don't find your home quite what you expected, princess."

Jolted from her thoughts by his taut voice, Faith raised confused eyes. "I'm sorry, my lord," she stammered. What he'd said hadn't registered, but the tone of his voice had, and Faith found herself suddenly even more off-balance.

"No, Faith," he said with resignation. "I am the one who is sorry." He saw her glance again at the bed and quickly look away, biting her lip. He felt a small pang of regret as he realized she still did not want to share a bed with him, that they weren't going to have quite the life he had envisioned. His anger abruptly dissolved, leaving a lump in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm certain you are tired," he said in a quiet voice. "Let's go home." Regret surged through him again. *Home*. Somehow, he doubted she would

ever feel this house he had painstakingly renovated and modernized for his marchioness was her home.

“Gareth?” Faith’s voice was small as he walked past her to open the door. He stood silent, his face impassive, and patiently waited for her to precede him from the room. Confused, she stopped next to him and looked up. “Gareth, have I made you angry?”

Gareth looked down at her upturned face and for a moment his heart wrenched. He resolutely repressed the emotion, because he would not force her to feel things she naturally did not. “No, Faith. I am not angry.”

She stared at him a moment longer, felt the distance between them, and drew her eyebrows together in a little frown. As always, when presented with something she didn’t understand, it seemed more prudent to retreat into herself to analyze and assess, so she said nothing.

Gareth watched his wife carefully. She hadn’t responded to his declaration of love, a fact he’d attributed at the time to shyness or surprise. Now, given her ever-increasing levels of disengagement, he read far more into her silence. “Shall we?” He bowed a little and indicated the door.

Faith gave him an odd look, then turned and left the room without a word.

## Twenty-four

The walk home was silent and filled with tension. A couple times Faith mustered up the courage to address her husband. Each time, the words died on her lips as she looked at Gareth's set, stony face.

Miserable, she watched the caretaker's cottage draw closer and wondered if the whole night would be spent in taut silence. Her unspoken question was answered as soon as they reached the door. Gareth turned the knob, pushed it open, and stepped aside to allow Faith to enter. When he didn't follow, Faith turned back to look at him.

"One of the footmen is coming down from Rothmere to stay here tonight and keep watch. I am going back to oversee the correction of some final problems in the renovation. It will be late when I finish, so I will just sleep there."

Faith didn't say a word, but her lips tightened and her brow furrowed.

"You are not to leave the house, Faith," Gareth commanded.

At that, she lost her temper. "For what, precisely, are you punishing me?"

Gareth raised a cool eyebrow. "You are my wife. I owe you no explanation." He then turned to go, leaving Faith standing with her mouth open, shocked by his high-handed statement. Just before the door closed, he looked back. "I mean it. Stay put."

And then he was gone. Faith pressed her lips together still more tightly, firmly repressing the urge to yank open the door and go after him. Hot words tumbled about inside her head, words she wanted to let loose and hurl at her husband. Instead, she stood still until the white-hot anger cooled to a cold core deep inside. Slowly, her lips relaxed and her hands unclenched, and she began to think about the circumstances that had led up to this predicament.

At some point during the tour of Rothmere, she had done something that angered Gareth. She thought back through the entire scene, and it slowly dawned on her. She had been so occupied with her thoughts of

future children—and what would occur to create those children—that she had been silent as he showed her his home. *Their* home. The home he had spent so much time renovating in order to...

Faith groaned, knowing he'd misinterpreted her silence as indifference. But then she frowned. This knowledge hardly excused his behavior. If he'd only asked her, spoken to her instead of bottling it all up, this misunderstanding might have been avoided.

Shaking her head, Faith looked out the window and saw John, an affable footman who'd accompanied them from London, standing in the middle of the clearing in front of the cottage. He was clearly a guard. She gave him a little smile and moved away from the window. Poor John didn't deserve what she was about to do. Once she'd gotten to Gareth, however, and explained everything, she was certain all would be well again.

Quickly, Faith walked into the bedroom and opened the window. Making sure she couldn't be seen from the front of the cottage, she sat on the window ledge and carefully put one foot, then the other, through the opening. Turning onto her stomach, she carefully slid down until she felt her feet touch the ground outside. Happy that nobody had witnessed her awkward exit, Faith next took a couple of steps toward the corner of the cottage. She was pulled up short by her skirt, which had snagged on the windowsill. Impatiently, she tugged it loose, then peered around the corner.

John was precisely where she'd seen him last, standing with his back toward her, looking down the road that led to Rothmere. Praying he wouldn't turn around and see her, Faith crossed the clearing on quick, light feet and slipped into the woods.

She followed the road but kept to the trees until she was certain John couldn't see her progress. Darkness was approaching, however, so she soon emerged and walked briskly along the side of the road, her mind spinning.

Gareth would be furious when he saw her, she admitted to herself with a guilty little pang. She briefly pondered how she should approach him. Should she be meek and apologetic or firm and businesslike? Faith pictured both scenarios, then dismissed them as too calculating. She would just be herself.

It was nearly dark when she reached Rothmere. The grounds, earlier bustling with activity, were deserted. Faith tried the front door but found it locked. She bit her lip in indecision. In all likelihood, Gareth was alone. She

was not quite brave enough to knock on the door, have him open it, and find her standing there in the deepening twilight, blatantly disregarding his order. She hesitated a moment longer and decided to try to find a different way into the house. It would be better if she faced him on her terms, having found her own way to their confrontation.

Crossing the terrace, she went down the steps and hastened around the side of the building.

It was almost completely dark at the cottage when John finally realized that something was not quite right. He peered at the little building. All seemed peaceful, but he could not shake the feeling that something was wrong. And then it hit him: the house was enshrouded in gloom, and the marchioness had yet to light a single lamp.

Alarmed, John knocked on the door. “Lady Roth?” There was no response. His heart pounding, the footman went inside. A cursory search confirmed his suspicions—Faith was not there. He left the house and took off at a run for Rothmere.

Gingerly, Faith lifted her skirts to step around some of the muddier spots behind the house. She’d been unable to find another way into the building, though she knew there had to be a servants’ entrance, or at least a place where deliveries were dropped off. The only possibility left was to go back around to the front and knock.

But as she rounded a corner, she saw it: a dilapidated greenhouse. She walked over to the door and found it half-hanging off its frame. Carefully, she pushed, and it grudgingly moved, the hinges protesting loudly. As soon as she’d forced an opening large enough, she slipped into the musty room.

Rows of tables covered with overgrown vines and broken pots met her eyes. Faith picked her way through the chaos toward the back of the room, where she hoped to find a door into the house. Sure enough, it was there, up three steps in the middle of the dirty wall. She grasped the knob and turned it, perfectly certain it would be locked, as had been all the other doors she’d tried. To her surprise, it turned easily. Her heart pounding, she stepped inside, closed the door behind her, and set off in search of Gareth.



John trembled at the thunderous expression on his master's face. "She went inside, my lord. I didn't see her come out at all. I swear I never moved from my post at the door."

Gareth's voice was tight. "I believe you." He stood and strode from the study, barking out orders to the footman, who was scrambling to keep up with him. "Gather as many men as you are able, get some torches, and meet me back at the cottage."

John hastened off to obey, leaving Gareth alone with his thoughts. He had no doubt that she'd disobeyed his instructions deliberately. He left the house and set off for the cottage, jogging steadily and easily down the road. Behind him, the meager household staff was quietly assembling in front of the house. They wouldn't be far behind.

The dark cottage came into view, causing Gareth's heart to sink. Somehow, he'd managed to entertain the notion that Faith would be here when he arrived. That hope was further dashed when he entered the dwelling and did not detect any sign of her presence.

He gave the main chamber a cursory inspection and went into the bedroom. The window was open wide and a scrap of color caught his eye. He crossed the room to look more closely. There, caught on the rough edge of the sill, was a torn piece of fabric of the same blue-purple shade as the dress Faith had worn earlier. He leaned out the window and inspected the ground. Despite the darkness, several footprints were clearly visible, all the same size.

Relief surged through him, followed quickly by disappointment. Faith had not been forced to leave, nor had she run off with someone else. But she *had* left.

Gareth heard the group of servants from Rothmere approach the clearing. He pulled his head inside and closed the window. Regardless of the reason she had gone, Faith still needed to be found.

The enormous house was silent and deserted. Candles burned here and there, indicating there had been someone within fairly recently. Search as she might, though, Faith found nobody. Not one servant. And not Gareth.

Repressing frustrated tears, she slowly climbed the wide staircase and made her way to the suite of rooms she was to share with her husband. The

bed in this chamber was turned down, ready for him when he decided to turn in. Wood had been freshly laid in the fireplace. She wandered through the bathing area into her own room, then stopped transfixed in the doorway and caught her breath.

It was beautiful! Obviously, this room had been completed during the past few days, because it was lovingly and painstakingly decorated with her in mind. Everything was silver and gray and white. An expanse of soft, dove-colored, deep-pile carpet covered the floor. The bed curtains were fashioned from white tulle shot through with silver threads and tied back to the posts with ropes of shining pewter. Faith sank to her knees next to the white wrought-iron bench at the end of the bed and rested her forehead on the silver satin cushions. Gareth had done this for her. Somehow, she had to find a way to make things right between them.

The skin on the back of her neck prickled. Faith sat up in alarm, suddenly feeling as though she wasn't alone. She glanced back quickly toward the bathing-room door, but it was closed. She frowned, certain she hadn't closed it when she came in.

Perhaps, she thought, Gareth had come in. Had he seen her reaction to her bedchamber? Had he watched her walk through the room he'd designed for her and wondered if she was happy with it? Perhaps he had been disappointed in her quiet reaction, closed the door, and gone back into his own room.

Worried, Faith ran across the room and jerked the door open. She rushed back through the bathing chamber and into Gareth's room. But it was empty, just as before.

Her mystification grew. It was obvious that Gareth had been here earlier and left, but what of the staff? What of the workers she'd seen all afternoon, busy making the estate habitable? Faith shook her head, confronted with two choices: she could stay here and wait for Gareth to return or go back to the cottage and talk to him tomorrow.

She recalled the brief uneasy feeling she'd had in her chamber, the sense that she was not alone. Suddenly, she didn't want to wait by herself in this enormous, echoing house for her husband. And so, her mind made up, Faith took a last glance around the room and left.

## Twenty-five

The cottage stood empty, dark, and desolate when Faith returned from Rothmere. As she entered the clearing, she looked around for John but did not see him. At first she was somewhat relieved she would not have to sneak past the footman to get back into the cottage, but then the full import of his absence hit her. He'd discovered she was missing and had gone to inform Gareth. Suddenly, the fact that the estate was deserted made sense. Gareth had every possible man out looking for her.

Her heart hammering, Faith crossed the small yard and opened the door. She didn't even have to wait for her eyes to adjust to know that Gareth was there in the gloom. His voice came to her ears, dangerous in its softness. "I distinctly remember telling you to remain here."

In the darkness, Faith pressed her lips together and didn't respond. Her husband's tone grated, causing her to forget her earlier resolution to make things right between them. She took a small step in retreat and placed her back against the closed door.

"You seem to have a great deal of difficulty following even the simplest of instructions." Gareth waited a moment, then continued. "Would you care to tell me where you've been?"

Faith finally spoke. "No." She pushed away from the door and walked toward the bedroom.

Gareth blocked her path. "I asked you a question, wife."

Faith stopped and made no attempt to walk around him. "I answered it, *husband*," she said calmly.

"Humor me. Pretend I like details."

Faith answered softly. "I took a walk."

"I see. Where did you go on this walk?"

Faith felt her composure begin to slip. She compressed her lips tightly, looked away, and refused to answer. Gareth waited before leaning to the side to look her in the eyes.

She looked the other way.

He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and forced her to look at him. "Just a walk? I don't believe you."

Faith's temper finally got the best of her. "I don't care what you believe, my lord."

He stared at her steadily for a long moment. She returned his gaze without flinching. Exasperated, Gareth grasped her upper arm and half-dragged, half-propelled her into the bedroom. "Pack," he commanded.

Faith pulled her arm free and rubbed it, though he hadn't really hurt her. "Where are we going?"

"Rothmere." He crossed his arms and leaned against the door, obviously intending to keep her in sight.

Faith did as he instructed, though she was nearly blind with fury. She took her meager belongings from the single wardrobe in the corner and stuffed them into a trunk with little regard for the condition they would be in when she unpacked. Then she grabbed a small carpetbag and tossed a couple things in it for the evening, unsure if he intended to send someone for the trunk tonight or if he would wait until tomorrow. Gareth continued watching for a few moments before returning to the living room.

Faith finished packing, took a deep breath, and composed herself. She sat quietly on the bed and waited, thoughts tumbling around in her head. It certainly seemed as though she had married a madman. His emotions fluctuated wildly from one moment to the next with little or no warning. Sometimes he showed amazing tenderness, only to turn cold and aloof with no explanation.

When he reappeared in the doorway, she stood without a word and followed her husband from the room. Gareth doused the lone flickering candle he'd lit so that Faith might see to pack, and walked through the great room. He held the door open for her to precede him outside.

A footman materialized from the shadows near the door. "Get word to those still searching that the marchioness has been found," said Gareth. The footman nodded and bowed, fading back into the shadows as quickly as he had appeared.

Gareth picked up the bag Faith had packed and offered her his arm, which she pointedly ignored. She began walking toward Rothmere, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. Gareth fell into step beside her, equally silent. Together, but worlds apart, they made their way home in the dark.

When they arrived, Gareth unlocked the front door and held it open for her. She walked into the magnificent foyer and knew a sudden sadness. Only hours ago, they had walked in this very door together, joking and laughing and enjoying their day together. This time, Gareth simply strode directly across the darkened hall to the staircase, the unspoken command for her to follow him hanging in the air. Beyond anger, beyond any feeling at all, Faith did just that.

They reached the master suite and went into Gareth's room. Faith looked around. Nothing had changed since she left. She glanced at the connecting doorway to her chamber, looked again at her husband, and found him staring at her coldly.

"It does not matter to me where you sleep, princess."

Stung, Faith lifted her chin and looked past him, fighting back tears she hoped he wouldn't see welling in her eyes. She was spared embarrassment by a commotion at the door.

"My lord, where should we put this trunk?" Two footmen stood in the open double doorway, Faith's trunk from London carefully balanced between them.

"The marchioness will instruct you where to take it," Gareth replied.

Faith drew herself up stiffly and turned. "Follow me, please," she said softly, and left her husband's room. She nearly collided with John, who was hurrying down the cor—ridor at a reckless pace.

"Pardon me, my lady!" he said, bowing, but obviously anxious to get to Gareth. Faith smiled weakly and stepped aside, then nodded again at the footmen who had her trunk. She led them down the corridor to the hall entrance to her bedchamber.

John watched the marchioness go, his face troubled. He turned back to Gareth and opened his mouth to speak, then dosed it in surprise. The marquess was staring at the open doorway through which his wife had just exited, his expression stark with pain and longing.

The footman dropped his eyes to the floor and shuffled his feet, feeling as though he had somehow intruded where he did not belong. The scuffling sound brought Gareth out of his reverie.

"What do you need, John?" The marquess's voice was short and clipped.

“My lord, it appears as though someone has vandalized the greenhouse.”

Gareth’s expression did not change. “We haven’t improved that building yet. How much damage could there be?”

“It’s not so much the damage, my lord, as it is the muddy footprints we found.”

Gareth raised inquisitive eyebrows.

“There are two sets, my lord,” the footman stated. “One set is small and was not made with boots.”

Gareth’s eyes widened, and then narrowed on the connecting door to his wife’s chamber. “I’ll be down to take a look myself in a few moments.”

John nodded and bowed, and left the room. Gareth stood still for a moment, not wanting his mind to take the next logical step. The timing, the footprints, the guilty look on Faith’s face when she’d come into the cottage, her refusal to admit to her whereabouts...It all added up to some pretty damning evidence.

He walked across the room and quietly locked the door to the bathing room. He thought of Faith running from him earlier that afternoon on their walk to Rothmere, her hair streaming behind her in a bright golden cloud, her skirts flying up around her knees. Laughing. Carefree. He clenched his teeth in an effort to control the painful direction of his thoughts and closed his eyes. After a moment, the pain receded, replaced by a welcome numbness. He left the room and walked down the corridor to Faith’s chamber.

Faith stood at the window, reflecting on the changes that had come about so quickly in her life. She had always managed to keep all the pieces and players of her life moving in a perfectly synchronized dance. No surprises. No unexpected steps. Until Gareth.

She’d met Gareth, and in one fell swoop the reins had been snatched from her fingers. Every time she tried to regain her equilibrium, the man she’d married pulled the rug from beneath her. She had never felt so disoriented, so confused.

She had also never felt so alive.

Now, however, everything felt wrong, and she did not know why. What had she done to make him withdraw so completely? It couldn’t only have been her distraction during the tour of the home he so obviously loved,

could it? They had come so far from the misunderstanding on their wedding day. To end up with *this* made no sense.

That was the way Gareth found her, standing before her window, lost in reflection. She had left the door open, and he paused there, just looking at her for a moment. Her hair was down, glowing golden in the light from the candles, and she appeared lonely, he admitted—almost bereft, quite young and very vulnerable. Gareth fought an almost irresistible urge to go to her, to pull her into his arms and make everything right again between them.

He stepped into the room, unsure of his intentions, knowing only that he wanted to end this horrible tension. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, his eyes riveted to the floor next to her bed. There, placed neatly next to one another, were the slippers Faith had worn that afternoon. They were covered in mud.

Cold fury swept through him, replacing the momentary tenderness he had felt. He clenched his teeth and tore his eyes from the slippers that told him all he needed to know about his treacherous wife. “Faith,” he said quietly.

She whirled around at the sound of her husband’s voice, hope soaring inside her—hope that abruptly died when she saw the expression on his face.

“Do not leave this room.”

Faith stared at him a moment, her features impassive. Then, without a word, she turned back to the window. She did not hear Gareth leave, but she did hear the door close, and then a moment later the sound of the key turning firmly in the lock.

Her husband had imprisoned her.

## *Twenty-six*

Grace Caldwell sat up in exasperation, tossed back the covers, and swung her feet over the side of the bed. She was reaching for her dressing gown when Trevor spoke, his voice rough with sleep.

“Should I be worried that you’re leaving my bed in the middle of the night?”

She smiled and looked over her shoulder at her husband. “No. I’m just restless, darling. Go back to sleep.” She slid to the floor and padded over to the window. The muted sounds of London at night reached her ears but did not manage to distract her from her worries.

“What’s bothering you, love?”

Grace bit her lip and regarded him with sheepish eyes. “I think I may have done a really bad thing.” She pulled her dressing gown more closely around herself and rubbed her arms. “I mean, I thought I was doing a good thing, but the more I think about it, the more sure I am that there’s no way it could have worked out quite as I’d intended, and the opportunity for misunderstanding is huge, and...” She stopped to take a breath and shivered.

Trevor chuckled. “You’re freezing. Come back to bed and try to tell me without rambling on in that breathless way of yours what you’ve done.”

Grace slipped off her dressing gown and climbed back into the large bed. Trevor slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her back up against his chest, settling her into his body, spoonlike. “Now,” he said soothingly. “Start at the beginning.”

So Grace told him about Faith’s fears about entering into a loveless marriage, and how she’d come up with the idea that Gareth should agree to wait to consummate their marriage until Faith was ready, and about how she’d talked to Gareth just before the ceremony. At that point, Trevor interrupted.

“Wait. You told Gareth, only moments before he was marrying your sister, that she didn’t want to make love with him but that she wanted to



marry him anyway?"

Put that way, Grace realized exactly how Gareth must have felt, and could see that she'd effectively backed him into a corner. "That's exactly what I did," she said miserably.

Trevor did his best not laugh, but his shoulders began shaking with the effort to suppress his mirth. Grace turned indignantly in his arms.

"Don't you *dare* laugh, Trevor Caldwell. I have a *terrible* feeling something's gone very wrong with them."

"Oh, I'm sure Gareth would quite agree with you there, darling."

She fumed in silence while her husband continued to chuckle. After a moment, she said, "I want to go to Rothmere."

"No." Trevor's voice was instantly sober. "No more interference."

"But—"

"No, Grace. You've done enough. That poor man probably hasn't even consummated his marriage yet. I can't imagine he'd be happy to have the reason he's currently celibate show up as a houseguest!"

She chewed on her lower lip in the darkness, searching for a way to convince her husband to let her go. His breathing was just beginning to even out when she came up with a plan. "I know!" Her voice was triumphant, and Trevor cautiously opened one eye. "I'll send Patience." He remained silent. "And Mercy, of course."

With a groan, Trevor propped himself up on an elbow and leaned over his wife, knowing she wouldn't rest until she had the entire Ackerly clan camped out at Rothmere on some sort of marriage-consummation watch. If he didn't stop her, she'd have the maids checking the sheets as if performing some archaic medieval ceremony every morning to report whether or not the deed had been accomplished. "You'll do no such thing. We'll leave tomorrow, ourselves."

Grace smiled gratefully, then gasped as he ran one hand up her rib cage and cupped her breast in his palm. "What are you doing?" she asked with a breathless little laugh.

He dipped his head and brushed his lips against hers. "Making love to my wife," he said in a gruff whisper. Then he added, "Because I *can*."

Gareth stood in the middle of the destroyed greenhouse, wondering how someone could do this and not be heard. Broken glass and shattered pottery littered the room. A large shard of glass fell from one of the panes, crashing loudly to the floor. Everyone flinched. Everyone except Gareth. The marquess remained impassive.

“The entire household was gone for a little while, my lord, while we were out looking for Lady Roth.”

Gareth looked again at the damning double set of footprints. Brief pain shot through him as he considered what the second set, much larger than the first, indicated: Faith had a lover. It was the perfect explanation for the secrecy and collusion, and the evidence was right before his eyes.

He turned away from the group of men awaiting his instructions, silently cursing himself. He should have seen it sooner. No wonder she hadn’t wanted to consummate the marriage right away. He would have known beyond a doubt that she was not a virgin.

Looking back at the assembled servants, he ordered, “Clean up this mess and get back to your usual schedules.” He nodded at John. “Come with me.”

John followed Gareth through the house to his study, listening as the marquess rapidly issued instructions. “Choose two more good men so you can work in eight-hour shifts. I want my wife watched at all times. She will stay in my room at night, but I still want someone on post outside my chamber door. She will be free to go where she wishes during the day, but someone is always to be with her.”

“Yes, my lord,” said John. The footman hesitated a moment to see if there would be anything further, then bowed and left the room.

Gareth watched his servant go, carefully considering his options with regard to the night. He did not look forward to sharing a room with Faith. Despite the fact that he knew her to be treacherous and deceitful, the fact remained that she always managed to get under his skin. If he left her locked in her own chamber, though, he had no doubt she would find some way to escape.

That really was the crux of his dilemma. Why did he not want her to escape? Why keep her here at all? If she had a lover, which appeared to be the case, why not let her go to the man? Their marriage was not consummated, and it had been entered into under conditions that would

make an annulment, though embarrassing, quite possible. So why did he not simply allow it to end?

Even as he asked himself the questions, Gareth knew the truth. He was truly in love with her. He loved her and still held out hope that she might be innocent. Hope that became more distant with each passing moment.

He left the study and briefly considered simply going to his chamber and dealing with the problem of Faith in the morning. He could just as easily post guards on her chamber door as he could on his own. Unfortunately, he wouldn't get any rest either way. If he didn't bring her into his room, he would wonder all night long if she had slipped past her guards and escaped.

Of course, if he did place her in his room, in the struggle to control his body's reaction to her, he would *still* have no peace. Contemplating his options, he slowly headed up the stairs.

Faith eased the door to Gareth's chamber open and peered out into the corridor. The door from the bathing room to the master bedroom had been locked, the bolt thrown, but it had not been pulled entirely closed. After listening carefully for a few moments, she decided Gareth wasn't in the room beyond and cautiously eased it open. Once there, she tiptoed to the door that opened to the corridor and stuck her head out, finding the hall gloomy and deserted. With another quick glance in both directions, Faith slipped out of the room and walked quickly down the hall, thankful for the thick, expensive carpet that swallowed the sound of her footsteps.

The entire day had been beyond bizarre. Her emotions had veered between happiness and confusion and anger before finally slipping into blessed numbness. She did not understand the man she had married, but now strongly felt she had to escape before his behavior became even more frightening. She did not *think* he would hurt her physically, but she wasn't entirely certain. He'd been acting so oddly. Her heart clenched as she thought of the tender, gentle way he had nursed her back to health from her head injury. No, she didn't believe *that* man was capable of physical violence toward her. But, her sense of logic reasoned, he also wouldn't imprison her.

The only thing she could think to do was run—find a way back to London before she was no longer able to do so. She'd seek protection from Grace and Trevor. She cringed a little when she thought about the friendship Trevor and Gareth shared, but hoped Grace could make her husband understand Roth had gone quite mad.

Silent tears slipped down her cheeks as she glanced furtively about and tiptoed down the dark stairs. She heard conversation coming from behind the closed door of Gareth's study and recognized her husband's voice. Holding her breath, she ran softly across the foyer and eased open the front door, hoping he wouldn't emerge while she was in sight. Luck was with her. Nobody stirred as she left the house and crossed the grounds to the stable.

Once there, she realized she had no idea how to saddle a horse. She knew how to ride, if only passably, but she had always left the saddling and such to the Ackerly grooms. She didn't have Grace and Mercy's passion for riding, and could do little more than keep her seat when moving at anything above a canter. Looking over the selection of mounts, she decided on a rather smallish, gentle-looking gray mare. Dubious about executing her plan, she stood for a few moments, biting her lip.

"M'lady?"

Faith whirled around. A young stable hand stood in the darkness, looking at her oddly.

"Did y'need something, m'lady?"

Faith thought quickly. "Why, yes," she averred, her mind racing. "I rather fancied a moonlight ride around the water's edge. Do you think you could saddle that mare for me, please?" She pointed at the little horse, smiling as sweetly as she could at the nervous young servant.

The stable boy had never seen someone so pretty. Awestruck, the only thought in his head was of pleasing the new mistress of Rothmere. He nodded quickly and ran off toward the tack room. "Sprite's a right pretty filly, m'lady, and gentle-like, too. I'll'ave'er set up right fer ye in no time."

"Thank you," said Faith, grateful. She looked outside nervously. All remained quiet at the dark house.

The mare nickered softly while the young man worked. Before she would have imagined it possible, he led the beast over to Faith and helped her up into the sidesaddle. She smiled down at him kindly. "What's your name, please?"

He blushed. “Ben, m’lady.”

“Well, Ben, thank you again. I am pleased to have met you.” Then she nudged the mare forward, walking her sedately out of the stable and into the moonlight.

Faith forced herself to remain calm and headed off in the direction of the two man-made lakes at the front of the house. She guided Sprite down the drive until it curved and she was sure she was out of sight of the house and the stable. Then she urged the mare into a light trot. She forced herself not to think, not to consider what she was leaving behind or to imagine the dangers that lay ahead. She would stay on the road for as long as she could, then move into the trees.

Her husband would come after her. Of that, she had no doubt.

Gareth stood silently in Faith’s bedchamber. Her empty bedchamber. He looked around at the perfectly neat room and wondered for a moment if she had ever even been there. There was certainly nothing to indicate the room had been occupied. No lingering scent. No evidence of personal items, save for the unopened trunk in the middle of the room. The bed wasn’t even wrinkled.

He felt nothing, not even anger. The door to the connecting bathing room between his chamber and hers stood open, giving him the only indication of her escape route. He had locked the door from his side, but the lock was flimsy and easy to manipulate. He wondered if he had subconsciously overlooked that fact on purpose.

Not that it mattered.

Walking to the window, he stood staring out into the night, half-expecting to see his wife’s golden hair glowing in the waning moonlight as she fled his estate. He saw nothing, of course, and wondered how long she had been gone. She couldn’t have made it far on foot. He thought of the dangers that might exist for her, a gently bred woman alone in the dark. He couldn’t think of a single article of clothing she owned sensible enough for a trek through the country. She had no survival skills and had never been exposed to the rigors of outdoor life. He shook his head. Obviously, he would have to retrieve her—if only for her own safety.

A muted shout reached him. Three floors below, he saw two of his men running across the darkened grounds in the direction of the stables. Curious, he looked to see what had caught their attention. An odd orange light was flickering behind the distant building, a light that looked like...

Fire?

With a muffled curse, Gareth strode from the room. Already, chaos was erupting on the lower levels of the mansion. His mind raced ahead to the obvious conclusion: Faith had set fire to the stables as a diversionary tactic. Was that possible? Could she truly be so devious?

He swept down the stairs and outside, issuing commands to everyone he passed. "The horses first! Get all the animals out of the stables, and then we'll see about the fire!"

When he ran across the expanse of lawn between the main house and the stables, he saw that most of the horses had already been moved, thanks to some quick-thinking stable hands. The stable itself was not on fire. Two small outbuildings used for storing tack and feed were burning separately. The fact that both buildings were on fire confirmed that they had been deliberately set ablaze, he realized. The fires were quickly being contained, however, and it appeared there would be very little structural damage.

Gareth's eyes swept across the corralled horses, counting and taking stock. "One is missing," he stated. Even as he said it, he knew the little mare wasn't going to be found. One of the grooms confirmed his suspicions a moment later, saying Sprite was nowhere in the area.

"Saddle Calypso for me," Gareth told the man in a dipped voice. He looked down the road that led from Rothmere.

He hoped he could manage to control his temper when he finally found his wife.

## *Twenty-seven*

Faith jumped when she heard something rustling in the bushes to her left. Her imagination had been working overtime since she'd left the comfort of the open road for the relative safety of the trees. She stayed close enough that she could still see the road, for she had no idea where she was. She did not know if the way she traveled even led eventually to London. All she knew was that it had taken two days for them to reach Rothmere traveling by coach. She imagined the return trip would take far more time than that, considering her lackluster riding skills.

The mare was a treasure, though, unerringly choosing the best path through the trees despite the novice guidance of her rider. Sprite nickered softly in response to the sporadic conversation Faith was having with her.

"I'm certain," the marchioness said, "that you realize how foolish and illogical it is for us to be taking this trip. I do hope you won't hold it against me." Faith grimaced as yet another leafy twig slapped her in the arm, and ducked just in time to avoid a rather low branch.

"I'm not sure what I'll do when day breaks. I'll have to find something for both of us to eat, of course." She looked down at her delicate attire, realizing that she couldn't possibly knock on someone's door and explain her plight. A woman traveling alone was an uncommon event, even among the peasant class. Her clothing marked her as someone of quality and would, ironically, raise more suspicion than if she were more simply dressed. Her only option was to keep moving until she found a village or an inn, and to hope Gareth hadn't already been there and inquired about her.

He'd look for her, of course—and he would be able to travel much faster, as he knew the area and had no need for stealth. Since he was an expert rider, she had little doubt he'd catch up to her quickly. Indeed, she'd been listening for him to do so for the last two hours. She considered briefly moving farther into the trees and praying for him to unwittingly pass, but knew that progress was her only hope.

She had another, more pressing problem. Dawn was beginning to streak the sky with shades of pink. It was one thing to travel close to the road during the night; during the day, she'd be exposed. Leaving the road, however, might result in her becoming utterly and completely lost. That thought terrified her.

It was no different, really, than the old fear she'd felt when she was in the maze. The woods were dense here, and she had no idea how far they extended. She imagined, too, that all sorts of wild creatures lived in these woods, wild creatures that would likely consider her and Sprite a rather delicious meal. So, she imagined, it was prudent to stay close to the road.

"You know, Sprite, I have decided to look upon this as a grand adventure," she told the horse somewhat shakily. "Just think of the freedom we suddenly have. We could become anything we want today. I could be a wild Gypsy, and you a beautiful unicorn with a golden horn." The little mare snorted doubtfully, and Faith laughed. "Well, it's fun to dream."

An errant spiderweb that stretched between two trees chose that moment to pop up in her path. Faith gave a small shriek as the gossamer strands adhered to her face. She twisted in her saddle and let go of the reins, scraping desperately at the sticky silk, terrified the spider was still in residence and would take grave offense to Faith destroying her home.

Her actions caused Sprite to dance nervously to the side. Faith, already precariously perched in the sidesaddle, lost her balance and slid to the ground in a heap. A moment later, more disgusted with herself than hurt, she got to her feet and walked over to Sprite, who stood patiently waiting for her near a tree.

"I don't suppose you have any idea how I should go about remounting, do you?" She gave the mare a wry look, then stiffened as she heard hoofbeats coming up the road at a frightening clip.

Faith froze. It could only be Gareth. She had seen nobody else, not a single soul, in the entire time she'd been traveling, and no one else would have reason to travel so quickly this early in the morning—at least, not as far as she could imagine. She put her hand on Sprite's bridle and began stroking the beast's nose, whispering soothing words, hoping the mare would stand quietly until the rider passed. With a grimace, she turned to watch the patches of road she could see through the trees, knowing full well that if she could see her husband, he would most certainly be able to see



her. All it would take was a glance in her direction. Between the bright periwinkle color of the gown she'd worn for almost twenty-four hours now and the soft gray of Sprite's coat, she and her mount didn't exactly blend into the foliage.

The rider finally appeared, mounted on an enormous black stallion. Faith could tell even from a distance that it was indeed Gareth. She watched the way his head turned as he scanned the forest on each side of the road, and knew with a sinking heart that she would easily be seen.

Sure enough, just before he drew even with her position, Gareth pulled on the reins, slowing his stallion, turning the mount, and walking it back to the edge of the road. "Faith," he called in a calm voice. "You might want to consider coming out of there on your own. I can promise you'd rather I didn't come in to get you."

At his words, logic and reason fled. Faith knew a sudden anger like none she'd never before experienced. Without bothering to respond, she turned and began to walk deeper into the woods, leaving Sprite standing where she was. Faith didn't look back, not even to see if Gareth knew what she was doing. All she knew was that she had to get away from him, had to find solace and think of some way out of this situation.

Gareth watched his wife disappear into the trees and shook his head. He led Calypso into the woods and looped his reins around a branch near Sprite, then headed calmly and purposefully into the underbrush after Faith. Though he couldn't see her anymore, he could hear her ahead, moving slowly through the branches and undergrowth, hampered by her inappropriate clothing and the fact that she hadn't a clue how to go about choosing the easiest path. If he hadn't been so angry with her, he might have been amused by her futile attempt at flight.

She heard him just as he caught sight of her, less than a hundred yards away, trying to untangle her hair from the thin branches of a sapling. She turned her head as much as possible, redoubling her efforts when she saw how close he was. However, the more she struggled, the more hopelessly tangled she became, until she finally gave up in disgust and turned her back on him. She simply stepped closer to the trunk of the young tree and waited.

He didn't say a word, just stepped up behind her and began loosening her tangled hair with deft fingers. In a matter of moments, she felt the

tension on her scalp disappear. She took one step away, but he grasped her arm just above the elbow and spun her around to face him.

“Have you nothing to say?”

His voice was calm, so she glanced up at him, trying to assess his mood. She raised her chin a notch. “Thank you.”

“Thank you?”

“Yes. *Thank* you.” When he continued to look at her, as if waiting for her to elaborate, she added, “For releasing my hair from that branch.”

He shook his head and turned, tugging on her arm to get her to follow. When Faith dug in her heels and refused to budge, he simply put both hands on her waist, picked her up, and tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Stop it! Put me down!” She balled up her fists and pounded at his back, wriggling and trying to kick her feet in protest at the undignified way he was carrying her. Gareth just tightened his arms around her upper thighs and ignored her complaints. When they got back to the horses, he perched her in Calypso’s saddle and swung up behind.

Faith sat stiffly erect and refused to look around. “I can ride Sprite, you know.”

Gareth bent forward and grasped that mare’s reins, giving her enough lead to follow comfortably. “I know you can, princess.” He pulled her back against him so she could sit more comfortably in her small portion of the saddle. “I just don’t trust you.”

He dug in his heels, and his stallion started forward. The group stepped back out onto the road and turned in the direction that continued away from Rothmere.

“Where are we going?” Faith tried to twist around to look at him, but her husband was holding her too securely against his chest.

“There’s an inn a short distance from here. I rode hard to catch up with you. Calypso needs a rubdown and something to eat, and we all need some rest before we start back.”

Faith looked down at her wrinkled and smudged attire, giving a grimace, but didn’t argue. She remained quiet until they reached the inn, worried thoughts tumbling around in her agile brain. He’d been angry with her before she’d run away, but that had felt different than now. Last night, his anger had simmered below the surface, and though she still didn’t really

know what had triggered it, the reaction in him had definitely been driven by emotions. Today, he was distant. Cold. Almost indifferent.

And yet, he'd come after her. Was it for pride, or something else?

They reached the inn. Thoughtful, Faith stood quietly while Gareth issued instructions to a man who came to take care of their horses. And though he didn't spare her a glance when he'd finished, she obediently followed him inside the inn, no longer concerned about her appearance or what anyone might think. She continued to ponder the situation, lost within her thoughts all through the breakfast Gareth ordered, only speaking when manners and force of habit dictated—both times to thank the serving girl, who appeared to deliver dishes and then to take them away.

She finally spoke when the innkeeper arrived to show them to a room. "We are staying here, my lord?"

Gareth ignored the question and placed a hand in the middle of her back to guide her down the hall after the innkeeper. Frustration blossomed in the pit of her stomach, but Faith held her tongue until they were inside the room and her husband had closed and locked the door.

"What is your problem?" The question burst from Faith in a rush. "Other than my running away, I cannot fathom what has happened to justify your treatment of me from the second we stepped inside the door at Rothmere until now. I've turned it over and over in my mind and can come up with nothing."

He remained silent but quirked an eyebrow.

"Nothing," she repeated more quietly, searching his face, biting her lip when she noted the obvious weariness in his eyes. She ached to step closer, to touch him and to find a way to understand him, but beneath the weariness there was pain and undeniable warning. Thus, she sat down on the edge of the bed and continued to regard him steadily. "I'm sorry I ran away, Gareth."

He turned without responding and pulled a chair from the corner of the room to position it in front of the door. He settled down, then propped his feet on a wobbly nightstand. "Sleep," he told her. "I'd like you to remain upright in the saddle for the trip back to Rothmere."

Faith didn't move. "Is this how we're to spend the rest of our lives together?" she asked.

Gareth quirked a humorless smile. “Only if our lives end today, princess. Go to sleep.”

Instinctively, Faith knew she was missing a great deal of the puzzle. Gareth wasn’t the sort of person to become this angry and cold over a perceived lack of interest in his home. There was something else at stake, something of greater import. Tilting her head, she gave him one last assessing look, slipped off her shoes, and stretched out on the bed with her back to him. Within moments, exhausted as she was by stress and the events of the last twenty-four hours, her breathing deepened and slowed, and she fell asleep.

Gareth, on the other hand, found slumber impossible. He watched her shoulders rise and fall, astonished that she showed no sign of guilt at her reprehensible actions. The involvement with another man he could almost understand, though the thought of it sent daggers of pain ripping through his chest. Logically, he realized she’d likely been involved with whoever it was long before he entered the picture. But the fires...?

Gareth sucked in his breath with sudden realization: she was not aware of the fires.

He didn’t know why he hadn’t seen it before. This meant, of course, that her lover had set the fires to buy her—*them*—some time. Probably she had been riding to meet him here, at this inn. It was the only logical meeting place, close enough for Faith to find easily, and comfortable until her lover arrived. This also explained Faith’s worried reaction when they continued to the inn instead of heading back to Rothmere.

Gareth’s jaw tightened. Well, the bastard could bloody well come back to Rothmere to fetch her. And when he did, Gareth would have someone follow Faith, catch the two of them together, and make her lover pay in flesh for the damage to his home.

*And to your heart*, a little voice called from within his head.

Resolute, Gareth ignored that little voice, satisfied that he had a plan. Giving Faith a final glance, he slouched down in the chair and closed his eyes as well.

While they slept, the Earl and Countess of Huntwick woke up in their own room just down the hall and began making preparations to continue their

journey to Rothmere. Their conversation was decidedly more pleasant, and they descended to the lower level of the inn to enjoy a leisurely breakfast while their coach was being readied.

While they were eating, a very nervous-looking man scurried into the dining area, followed by a large red-faced woman. "I don't care if the gentleman looked like quality. This is not the sort of establishment that will tolerate a man bringing in his doxy for a morning of fun," she said in a firm voice that brooked no opposition.

Fascinated, Grace stopped eating and began watching the altercation. Trevor raised his eyebrows at her overt eavesdropping, but said nothing.

"She didn't look like a doxy," protested the man meekly. "And he paid for the room in advance."

"They appeared out of the woods first thing in the morning, sharing a horse and leading another. No coach, no servants. Nothing good can come of that, I say."

Trevor cleared his throat softly. "Grace, finish your breakfast. We need to get moving so we can make it to Rothmere before nightfall."

Reluctantly, Grace turned to her husband. "Oh, I've finished." She glanced back toward the innkeeper and his wife, then leaned toward her husband and whispered, "How'd you like to be married to her?"

The earl smiled. "She seems to have a fine set of values. And I'll bet she doesn't linger over her breakfast when she is on a tight traveling schedule." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Grace laughed. "Oh, all right. Let's go." Trevor paid the harassed innkeeper for their meals and the room and escorted his wife out to their waiting coach.

A few moments after they left, Gareth woke with a start and glanced toward the bed. Faith was sleeping peacefully. Steeling himself for the adorable confusion he knew he'd see in her eyes when he woke her up, he stood, walked over to the bed, and reached for her shoulder. Just before he touched her, he stopped.

She looked so heart-wrenchingly beautiful. So innocent. Unable to stop himself, he bent and pressed his lips to her forehead, giving her a soft, stolen kiss. And then, angry with himself for that display of weakness, he roughly shook her awake.

## Twenty-eight

**I**’ll ask you one last time. Where is my sister?” Grace’s voice echoed through the foyer as she loudly repeated herself to the insolent butler.

Desmond, who had only just arrived from London the evening before, looked affronted. “You needn’t shriek, my lady. As I’ve already told you, the marquess and marchioness are out.”

Grace threw up her hands in exasperation and looked at her husband for help. Trevor leaned against the curved railing of the sweeping staircase, grinning widely. “You realize, of course, that I’m quite enjoying this.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“It’s high time,” he continued, “that you have a small dose of what I had to endure from that wretched butler your aunt employs.”

Grace gave him an overly sweet smile. “Just last week, Aunt Cleo and I were trying to decide what we should do with Greaves, my lord. I was telling her we had a place for him at the Willows.” Her eyes widened innocently. “Truly, it would be a shame to hurt his feelings by taking away the joy he finds in continuing his service to our family, especially in the last, golden years of his life.”

“I’ve done my duty by your aunt’s servants and then some, young lady. I’m waiting for Mercy to grow up and snag Sebastian. Greaves would be a wedding present fit for a duke.”

Grace laughed merrily at the thought, quite forgetting her impatience with Desmond, who stood nearby with a baffled look on his dignified face. The couple, who had arrived unannounced, were behaving entirely oddly, not quite like any married couple he’d ever seen. They actually seemed to enjoy one another’s company. He cleared his throat to remind them of his presence.

Her mood lightened, Grace turned back to try another inquiry into the location of her sister and brother-in-law, but stopped when she heard trotting hoofbeats crossing in front of the house. She ran to the door and opened it just in time to see Faith and Gareth disappearing in the direction

of the stables. Riding one horse and leading another. She barely managed to stifle a gasp of horrified laughter.

Somewhat mollified, she smiled at Desmond. "Would you please ask the housekeeper to prepare a room for us?" When the butler gave her a blank look, she patiently repeated the question, but in a much louder voice.

"My lady," said Desmond. "For the *second* time, it is both unnecessary and unbecoming for a woman of your station to yell like that."

Trevor snorted.

Grace opened her mouth to retort, but the butler was spared her wrath by the entrance of a plump, pleasant-looking older lady who, having overheard Grace's request, came bustling into the foyer to rescue the unexpected guests from the older man. "My lord," she said to Trevor, and bobbed him a little curtsy. She turned to Grace and did the same, "My lady. I'm Mrs. MacAvoy, the housekeeper. Perhaps you'd like to enjoy a drink in the library while your rooms are being prepared? I'm told the marquess and marchioness have just arrived. You will be announced as soon as they've come in and cleaned up a bit."

Before Grace could reply, Trevor smoothly stepped in and placed a hand on her shoulder. "We'd enjoy precisely that, thank you." He gave his wife a dampening look. For once she followed his lead, although the mutinous expression in her blue eyes did not escape him.

Mrs. MacAvoy nodded and smiled. "Follow me, please."

Faith lifted her head and sniffed the air as they rode into the paddock.

"Something is burning, my lord."

"Burned," he replied curtly.

She looked around, but all appeared intact. "What burned, please?"

He watched her closely. "A couple of the outbuildings, late last night."

"That's terrible. Nobody was hurt?" Her tone was genuinely concerned.

Gareth looked at her steadily for a long moment and silently congratulated himself on his earlier assessment of her innocence with regard to the fires. "Nobody was hurt, and the damage was minimal." He swung his leg over the back of his horse and stepped down.

“I am glad,” she returned softly. A stable hand arrived and took Calypso’s reins, then waited as Gareth helped Faith dismount. She slid down, securely supported by his strong hands around her waist, which assisted her lightly and safely to the ground. When they fell away without lingering, she felt a momentary sense of loss.

An uncomfortable silence stretched between the pair as they started toward the house. Faith cast wildly about in her mind for something to say, then wisely decided to remain quiet. Instead, she thought again about the fires Gareth had mentioned. Something bothered her about the situation, but she couldn’t quite figure it out. It was only when they’d nearly reached the front door that she realized what it was.

She sucked in her breath with an angry little hiss and grabbed his arm. “You thought I started those fires before I left, didn’t you?”

He stopped and looked at her, his brow raised. “It occurred to me.”

She glared at him for another moment and turned away without speaking, torn between anger and sadness. Without a backward glance, she crossed the wide terrace, went inside, and shut the door behind her.

After a moment, Gareth followed, entering the house in time to see her disappear into the hallway at the top of the stairs. He stopped a moment, trying to decide if he should follow her or not, shook his head, and went to the library. A drink first—then they would talk.

He strode into the room and headed straight for the well-stocked sideboard, automatically reaching for the bottle of port he particularly favored. He was just setting the decanter down when he heard a rustling sound. “Faith, if you could just give me a few moments, I’ll—” The rest of what he intended to say was lost at the sight of the Earl and Countess of Huntwick. “What are *you* doing here?” He scowled at the additional and unwanted complication.

Trevor grinned at his wife. “You know, my dear, I don’t think we’re terribly welcome,” he said.

Grace ignored him and stepped forward. “Where’s Faith?”

Gareth stared at the small woman who’d already caused so much turmoil in his short marriage. “I’m not sure I’m inclined to allow her to see you.”

Recalling the agreement she’d wrung from him on his wedding day, Grace gave her husband’s friend a rueful smile. “I can’t say I blame you,



my lord. Any possibility you might forgive me?"

Gareth glanced at Trevor, who stood a bit behind Grace, watching. He wondered how much his friend knew about the promise he'd made, wondered even more what Grace knew about her sister's lover. He lifted his glass of port to his lips and took a sip. "Ask one of the footmen to show you to her chamber." His face remained expressionless, closed and hard.

"Thank you," she said softly, sent her husband a quick smile, and left the room.

Gareth nodded toward the empty glass in Trevor's hand. "Another? Since you seem to have helped yourself."

Trevor nodded, smiling, and handed it over. "You look positively grim."

"Are all women this much trouble, or is it a trait peculiar to the Ackerly females?" Gareth grimaced. "I don't remember having so much difficulty in the past."

"As it turns out, the benefits end up far outweighing the disadvantages." The earl gave the marquess a long, slow grin. "Although, in your case, I understand you had to wait a few days for the benefits."

Well. That answered one question. "I'm still waiting."

Trevor stopped in the act of bringing the glass to his lips and gave his friend an incredulous look over the rim. "I didn't think she'd take that silly promise my wife strangled out of you this far!"

"There have been...hmm..." Gareth thought a moment, reaching for the best possible word to sum up the days since his wedding. "Complications."

"Anything you'd care to discuss?"

Gareth looked down and swirled the liquid in his glass, then strolled to the desk and set it down. He picked up the silver case that held his cheroots and sent a questioning glance at Trevor, who shook his head. After lighting one for himself, he inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out into the room. "Faith has a lover."

Of all the problems Trevor might have imagined, *this* had never occurred to him. It was beyond the scope of his belief. "You must be mistaken."

"I wish I were."

"She's admitted it?"

Gareth shook his head. "I haven't confronted her, but the evidence is damning, and I've all but caught them together."

Trevor still shook his head. "Where would she find a lover out here? It doesn't make sense."

"I think he followed us here from London." Gareth outlined briefly all that he knew, from the footprints outside the caretaker's cottage to the makeshift camp in the woods, and finally to the vandalism and double set of prints in the greenhouse. "When I put all of that together, it finally made sense that she wouldn't want to consummate our marriage. She isn't a virgin."

Trevor looked up swiftly, anger sparking in his eyes. "You aren't suggesting my wife knew about this and conspired with Faith?" His voice was low, dangerous.

Gareth shrugged. "I'm not suggesting anything. I intended to talk to Faith about it, to see where we would go from here. Last night, after finding the evidence in the greenhouse, I was much too angry to deal with it, so I locked Faith in her room. She escaped and ran away. Took me all night to track her down and bring her back."

Trevor relaxed and chuckled a little. "So that's why your man could only offer Grace the information that her sister was 'out.' He had no idea where you were."

Gareth took another sip of the port and nodded. "And now you're here. And Faith is talking to Grace."

Faith stood before the wardrobe with her arms crossed, contemplating what she should pack and what would remain here. Hopefully, Gareth would send the balance of her belongings to Pelthamshire, where she intended to go and seek an annulment. She whirled around at the sound of the door opening and cried out happily when she saw her sister's head appear.

"Grace! What in the world? When did you get here?"

Grace pushed the door completely open and ran to embrace her sister. "I insisted on coming, and Trevor finally agreed, so we arrived this afternoon." She took a step back and frowned, keeping both of Faith's hands clasped in hers. "You've lost weight."

Faith waved a hand. "Not too terribly much. I was ill right after we arrived, but Gareth took very good care of me."

Her sister narrowed her eyes shrewdly. "And is he still taking good care of you?"

Faith pressed her lips together, considering a moment, and sighed. Her sister would worm the story out of her one way or another. "I don't know, Grace. Things are a bit mixed up."

"I got that feeling from the little Gareth said in the library." Her face sobered. "Tell me what has happened."

"I'm not sure where to start, Grace. Honestly, I begin to wonder if he isn't quite mad." And Faith began explaining everything that had happened, from the day of their wedding until now. Grace kept quiet, nodding at some parts and smiling at others, until Faith told her of Gareth's odd mood swings, beginning with the tour of Rothmere.

"It wasn't that I was uninterested," she added miserably. "The idea that I'd be bearing his children just distracted me, you see."

"You have to try talking to him," advised Grace, her eyes earnest. "The worst thing that can happen is for either of you to allow things to go unsaid, to close up and not communicate your feelings and worries to each other."

Faith looked away. She walked to a brocade-covered bench at the end of the bed and sat down, drawing her knees up beneath her dressing gown and wrapping her arms around them.

Grace crossed her arms. "What haven't you told me?"

"I ran away last night."

"You did what?"

Faith looked up swiftly, her expression defensive. "Well, he locked me in here and wouldn't tell me why!"

"Good Lord!" Grace climbed up on the bed and stretched out on her stomach with her feet on the pillows. "Why do you think he did *that*?"

"I haven't a clue, which is why I think he's gone mad. So I sneaked out through his chamber, took a horse, and left."

Grace stifled a giggle. "Oh, Faith. You didn't really try to ride back on a horse, did you?"

"Well, how else was I going to get to London?" She looked indignant. "And I did just fine until I ran into a spiderweb."

At that, Grace *did* laugh, but she sobered quickly. “Overreacting in such a way is so unlike you.” Grace propped her chin in her hands and regarded her sister steadily. “Don’t you think Gareth might think *you’ve* gone mad as well?”

“I don’t think he cares anymore. He found me and brought me back, didn’t say two words on the entire trip, and has quite dismissed me from his mind. Do you know he thought I set a couple outbuildings on fire last night to distract the household from my running away?”

Grace tilted her head, no longer surprised by the oddities of the story. “There’s too much missing information. Something has caused him to jump to some very harmful and inaccurate conclusions. These seem easy to correct. You need to talk to him.”

“No. I want to go home.”

“Talk first,” Grace urged.

Faith pressed her lips together, an obstinate look on her face. “I’ll talk to him, but only to tell him I want to go home.”

Grace crawled forward and leaned off the end of the bed to wrap her arms around her sister. “Promise me you’ll try to open up and *really* talk. If it doesn’t go well, Trevor and I will take you back to London with us. London will be better than wasting away in Pelthamshire. You’ll never get any peace there with the twins and Mercy nattering around you asking questions.

Faith smoothed an errant red curl from her sister’s face and leaned her temple against the top of Grace’s head. “I’ll try,” she murmured.

They enjoyed an early supper in the smaller, less-formal breakfast nook so that they weren’t spread, uncomfortably distant, along the long polished mahogany table in the dining room. Trevor and Grace carried the conversation, keeping it mostly light, bringing Gareth and Faith up to date on the happenings in London.

After the dishes had been cleared away, Grace nodded to Trevor, who announced they would retire early, as they were a bit tired from the trip. Faith bit her lip and felt her stomach do an odd flip. She’d be alone with Gareth—though she half-expected him to excuse himself as well

When he didn't, she drew in a shaky breath. It was time to talk, but she had no idea where to begin. The silence grew until it felt like a separate entity sharing the space with them. Finally, she cleared her throat and spoke. "I didn't start those fires, Gareth."

"I know."

She waited another moment. "Perhaps we could just start at the beginning and clear the air."

He looked at her, and Faith felt her heart fall. His brown eyes were expressionless, although the look on his face was almost pleasant. "I don't see how it will help, but go ahead."

"Well." She looked down at her hands. "I was not uninterested in the tour of Rothmere. I know it came across that way, but a thought occurred to me that rather consumed my attention, and I wasn't aware that I had withdrawn."

"Do go on, princess. I'm dying to hear about this...thought."

Faith blushed. "You were so proud of the changes you'd made to Rothmere. As I listened to you, I realized..." She swallowed hard to get past the lump of embarrassment in her throat. "I realized that I would bear the child to whom you would someday leave the estate."

Gareth's eyes grew hard, glittering dangerously in his previously placid face. "You can hardly bring yourself to utter the thought, can you?"

Faith, misunderstanding the reason for his sudden anger, shook her head hastily, reached out a placating hand, and placed it on his arm. "No! It isn't that. It's just that it was the first time the thought occurred to me and..." She stopped and drew her eyebrows together. "Do you not want an heir, my lord?"

Gareth's flesh twitched under the soft, long-fingered hand on his arm, his wife's touch burning into him like a brand. He felt himself stirring and recognized his arousal for what it was. He lifted his face and smiled, an ominous expression that did not reach his eyes. "Are you telling me you're now willing to fulfill your marital obligations, Faith?"

Everything about the conversation was precarious, and Faith felt off-balance, unsure of the rules, or even of what role she played in this game. All she knew was that he expected an answer. Summoning her courage, she met his eyes and nodded.

"Tell me. Aloud."

Oh, God. "I—I am now willing to fulfill my m-marital obligations."

That she had no idea what he meant by that did not occur to Gareth. "So you're ready to go to bed with me, to sleep with me, in my room, to allow me to plant my seed inside you every night until it takes root and grows within you to bear me an heir?"

"Every night?"

Gareth leaned forward and caught her eyes with his. "Yes, Faith. Every night until you become pregnant. That's the only way I can hope to be sure the brat you carry is mine and not your lover's."

Faith sucked in her breath with a hiss, shocked beyond words. Her face drained of color for a long moment before two bright spots of angry red appeared on her cheeks. Gareth watched them appear and took her reaction as one of guilt.

"Nothing to say, princess?"

She closed her eyes and averted her head for a moment, folding her lips in a way Gareth knew indicated a struggle for control. When she looked back at him, her gray eyes were clear and frosty, her face calm. "I want to go home."

"No."

"One way or another, I'll leave."

"I'll find you."

Faith shook her head. "Why, Gareth? What's the point?"

And that...ah, *that*. The question he could not answer because it ripped him apart. Because despite everything, despite the fact that she hadn't even bothered to deny his accusation, he loved her. Outwardly, he appeared unmoved, and fought hard to do so. She could never learn of his inner turmoil. He took a deep breath. "Go, then. You're right. There is no point."

The words fell between them, insinuated themselves into the invisible wall they'd erected and strengthened it. After a moment, Faith stood and left the room, quietly closing the door behind her. She was halfway up the stairs when the sound of glass shattering against the wall made her flinch. Then, as servants came at a run in reaction to the noise, she resumed her sedate climb to the second level and disappeared down the hall.

## Twenty-nine

Faith's jaw ached. Her smile faded as yet another curious group of nosy gossip seekers glided away unsatisfied. Discreetly, she lifted her fan to hide the fact that she was opening and closing her mouth to work the muscles and relax her jaw. Between gritting her teeth to keep from saying some of the things she truly wished to say and smiling disarmingly, she'd managed to build up a great deal of tension—a situation for which she entirely blamed Grace.

She had been against going out. There would, Faith knew, be questions for which she didn't have answers, and with the ton, unanswered questions meant speculation, and speculation became rumors. Despite these protests, Grace had somehow managed to convince her that *not* making an appearance would be far worse, especially since it was known that she had returned to London and was residing with the Caldwells instead of living in Gareth's town house.

"It will be fine, Faith," her sister had promised. "We'll just tell them the truth: Gareth is seeing to the renovation of Rothmere while you enjoy the remainder of the Season in Town, and you didn't wish to stay anywhere alone."

Thus Faith had found herself at this ball, sedately descending the steps behind the Earl and Countess of Huntwick, a contrived serene expression on her face hiding the inner turmoil she felt at hearing her title bellowed out for the very first time over the din of several hundred guests.

By the second hour, she was ready to leave. She stepped up behind Grace, who was talking with two gentleman friends of Trevor's. "This was a terrible idea," she hissed after her sister excused herself from that conversation.

"Oh, give it a chance," Grace coaxed. "You've got to jump back in sometime and break the ice. After tonight, they'll leave you alone."

"Faith!" Both girls turned in the direction the voice had originated and saw Amanda Lloyd hurrying toward them, her husband striding along in her

wake. She reached the Ackerly sisters and threw her arms around Faith. “What are you doing here? Where’s Gareth?” She craned her head, looking around for her brother-in-law.

Faith’s happy smile at seeing her friend faltered a bit at Amanda’s words. She winced inwardly when she saw those guests closest to her lean in to hear the answer. Catching herself from relaying any truths, she carefully renewed her smile. “He’s still at Rothmere. There were a few more details regarding renovations to which he wished personally to attend.”

Amanda tilted her head quizzically for an instant, not fooled by the fleeting changes in Faith’s expression. She swiftly recovered and turned to Jonathon, who had just managed, after being waylaid by an acquaintance, to catch up. “I’ve found my friends, darling, so you can run along and do whatever it is you men do.”

He smiled indulgently and kissed the hands of both Grace and Faith. His gaze lingered a shade longer than necessary on Faith, but he asked no questions. “Ladies.” He nodded and disappeared into the crowd.

Grace laughed. “Men! They like to pretend they’re happiest when they’re off playing cards or hunting or some such thing, but they always come running back.”

Amanda nodded and linked arms with the two sisters. They began strolling through the crowd. “I have a million questions, of course,” she said, “but I’ll not ask them here. You must both come to tea tomorrow.”

Grace readily accepted, and though Faith said nothing, her companions took her silence as assent. She swallowed hard. The situation was horrid. She couldn’t possibly expect Amanda to choose a friend over a member of the family, and she was terribly afraid it would come to that.

The girls walked on, arms still linked, skirting the edge of the dance floor and heading for Cleo Egerton, who stood talking with a cluster of older people. As they approached, Faith noticed the group included a familiar face: Horatio Grimsby, the Earl of Jameson.

With embarrassed chagrin, Faith remembered the last time she’d seen him, crawling on the floor of the parlor at the Caldwell town house, searching for the spectacles upon which she’d just stepped. He’d been preparing to propose when Gareth arrived.



Judging by the uncomfortable look on Horatio's face, he recalled the moment as well. When he refused to meet her eyes, Faith's heart went out to him. Knowing that only she and Gareth had witnessed the event, she decided to do her best to put him at ease.

With that in mind, she watched him carefully. The next time he glanced her way, she made it a point to catch his eye and give him a warm look. His eyes widened briefly in surprise before he returned it with a self-conscious smile of his own. A few moments later, he excused himself from the conversation and hesitantly approached.

"A pleasure to see you again, Lady Roth."

Faith nodded and smiled again. "The pleasure is mine as well, Lord Jameson. I trust you're enjoying yourself this evening?"

He fidgeted a little, uncomfortable as always around anyone of the opposite sex. "I am, thank you." He swallowed visibly, then blurted, "I wonder if you might honor me with a dance, my lady?"

Faith's smile faltered slightly. It hadn't occurred to her that anyone might like for her to dance with him, though it was hardly an unusual occurrence. Indeed, both Grace and Amanda frequently danced with men other than their husbands. Considering that, she reasoned it would certainly be well within the boundaries of propriety to honor Horatio's request.

"Why, yes, thank you. I think that would be lovely," she allowed, just as he was about to excuse himself and turn away. He quickly smiled, offered his arm, and led her out to the dance floor.

The eyes of the ever-watchful ton followed them, and speculation abounded, for although Faith's logic in accepting the dance seemed perfectly sound to her, she had not, in her innocence, taken several things into consideration. First, though it was true her sister and Amanda sometimes danced with other men, they were typically married friends of their husbands, and Trevor and Jonathon were usually in attendance. Second, Faith's marriage was new, had been rather unexpected, and she was making social appearances without her husband a shockingly short time after their nuptials. Finally, it was noted that Faith had actually prompted Lord Jameson to initiate a conversation, that it appeared Lord Jameson was behaving in a rather proprietary way and that Faith did not at all seem to mind.

Not all the eyes following their dance did so gleefully, however. Jonathon Lloyd watched, his face impassive, and abruptly left the ballroom.

Trevor glanced up from his cards as Jonathon entered the room where he was playing. A short look passed between the two men, completely unnoticed by anyone else. Jonathon spoke briefly with their host, then walked to the French doors and disappeared through them. Trevor watched him go, finished the hand, and quietly excused himself from the table.

Outside, Jonathon stood at the marble balustrade, staring out into the inky darkness of the unlit garden. "Faith is back in London rather quickly," he remarked when he heard Trevor light a cheroot behind him.

"Yes."

"Should I ask how it came about?"

"Probably not."

Both men were silent a few long moments. Jonathon cleared his throat. "Gareth?"

"Still at Rothmere." Trevor stepped up beside his friend and held out the open case that contained his cheroots. Jonathon nodded his thanks, took one, and lit it.

The two noblemen finished smoking in silence.

In direct contrast to their husbands' nearly monosyllabic conversation of the previous evening, Amanda and Grace insisted on peppering Faith with endless questions. Reticent at first, she found herself reluctantly opening up.

"We never should have married," she admitted with a little sigh.

Amanda glanced at Grace, who was giving Faith a look of admonishment. "Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "Whom else would you marry? Gareth is perfect for you."

Faith snorted indelicately, taking the other two completely by surprise. "Perfect? Hardly. We haven't a single interest in common, and he utterly lacks a sense of humor."

*Amanda's brows shot up. "Gareth? Lack a sense of humor? I find it impossible to imagine such a thing! Why, he drove Jonathon crazy for years because he wouldn't take anything seriously." She smiled fondly. "When I think of some of the pranks he pulled..."*

Grace nodded. "Having been one of his victims, I have to agree. You know as well as I what trouble Gareth's sense of humor caused last year, Faith."

Faith shrugged. "Regardless, I find him terribly dour and not at all disposed to amusement." She said it in such a prim, polite tone that both of her companions burst out laughing.

When she caught her breath, Amanda smiled at Faith. "Well, you can't stay in London forever. When do you intend to go back to Rothmere?"

"I don't."

Amanda looked shocked. "You're going to wait for him to come collect you, then?" There was a hopeful note in her voice, but Faith shook her head.

Grace hastily interrupted before Faith could speak. "She hasn't given it enough thought, enough time. She is, of course, more than welcome to stay with me for as long as she needs. Then she can go back home."

"Actually," argued Faith, smoothing a nonexistent wrinkle from her gown, "home is precisely where I intend to go." She looked up and met her sister's eyes. "Home to Pelthamshire."

Grace closed her eyes and shook her head. "You can't run away from a marriage."

Faith looked amused. "Why not? Half the ton does precisely the same. Gareth will live his own happy little life here or at Rothmere, and I'll live my quiet life in the country. Patience deserves a holiday, in any case."

"But Faith," protested Amanda, "don't you want children? I imagine Gareth would like an heir..." She trailed off as Faith's face became cold and impassive, suddenly reminded of why Society had referred to her as the Ice Princess.

"Gareth," said Faith loftily, "will have to make his own decisions with regard to children. I'm fairly certain he'll not want to father one with me."

An awkward silence filled the room. Grace fidgeted a little, then picked up her cup of tea and turned to Amanda. "Speaking of children, how is little Geoffrey?"

Grateful, Amanda seized the offered topic and launched into a spirited description of her son's latest accomplishments. Grace smiled and laughed and shared her own stories about baby Christian.

Faith listened politely, sitting perfectly still, her back ramrod straight, and tried to ignore the knot of misery lodged in her chest.

## Thirty

The study was silent, save for the ticking of the large clock on the mantel. Gareth glanced at it and threw his fountain pen onto the desk in disgust. The minute hand had only advanced five minutes since he'd last checked.

It wasn't that he had nothing to do. On the contrary, it was becoming increasingly evident he would have to hire a secretary to handle the more mundane matters, like keeping track of his correspondence. He'd already handed over the day-to-day running of the estate to his steward, and household matters to Mrs. MacAvoy. That left only his more complicated business investments, which occupied almost all of his time. The running of these investments was difficult, seeing as he'd been at Rothmere for merely a month. He was going to have to make a trip to London soon, if only to meet with some of the men with whom he partnered.

London.

*Faith.*

He ran a hand through his hair, reluctantly reflecting on the fact that the past three weeks of solitude hadn't made a dent in how much he missed his wife. Lately, he'd found himself slipping into daydreams about the way things could have been. Staring at the leather couch near the fire, he imagined Faith curled in a corner, twirling a strand of her golden hair, occasionally glancing up from the book she read to find his eyes with hers, smiling softly whenever she did.

Sometimes it was difficult to remember she'd been untrue. Other times it was all he could do to forget.

A discreet knock on the study door interrupted his reverie. "Come," he called, reaching for the pen he'd thrown down.

Desmond's head appeared. "My lord, the Earl of Seth has arrived."

Gareth grimaced. A visit from his dour elder brother was the last thing he needed. "Show him in, please, Desmond."

The old man glowered. "He was quite unannounced, my lord."

Gareth raised his brows at the crotchety servant. "I trust you'll manage to adjust to the unexpected event. Show my brother in, please."

Desmond's head disappeared, but his grumbling carried back up the hall and through the door he'd left ajar. A moment later, Jonathon stepped into the room. Gareth stood but didn't step from behind his desk.

"Afternoon, Jon. Your trip was uneventful, I hope?"

"I've no complaints." Jon seated himself in one of the chairs facing Gareth's desk. He glanced at the pile of papers and correspondence.

"Business is good?"

Gareth sat down and leaned back in his chair. He steepled his fingers and looked at Jon over the tips. "You came all the way from London to see if business is going well?"

"It seemed a good place to begin."

Gareth smiled slightly. "Business is fine. I'm going to be needing a secretary."

"And the renovations?"

"Complete. Would you like a tour?"

"Perhaps later."

"Mm. Then I have that to look forward to."

The men lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and the ticking clock became once more the dominant sound in the room.

Jon cleared his throat. "Would you like to know why I've come?"

"Not particularly."

Jon scowled. "I came to talk to you about your wife."

Gareth gave a wry laugh, picked up his pen, and straightened the papers in front of him. "Then you've wasted your time."

"At the very least you'll need an heir."

"I have an heir."

"Oh?" Jon raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't aware you had one tucked away."

"So typical." Gareth gave his half brother a look of derision. "You automatically assume I'm referring to some illegitimate child, when in reality, I meant your little Geoffrey."

"What else would you expect me to think?"

"That's my point. It's precisely what I'd expect you to think. Sad, is it not?"

“I didn’t come here to argue, Gareth.”

“No. I’m sure you did not. However, the topic you came to discuss is closed.” Gareth tapped his fountain pen against his forefinger. “I have work to do. Will you be staying?”

Jon nodded tightly.

Gareth rang for Desmond, who appeared so quickly that it was obvious he’d been listening. “Have Mrs. MacAvoy prepare a room for Lord Seth. And inform Cook we have a guest for dinner.” He nodded at his brother, effectively dismissing him. “I’ll see you this evening.”

Dinner was an uncomfortable, quiet affair. Both men ate in near silence, the clinking sounds of their utensils against their plates oddly loud in the long, high-ceilinged dining room. Twice Jon spoke, both times to compliment Gareth on his cook, to which the marquess responded in short, polite sentences.

Inside, however, Gareth was seething. He’d accomplished nothing the rest of the afternoon and had finally given up working. He’d thought a long, bruising ride on Calypso might help, but even in that he was thwarted. The rhythm of the stallion’s galloping hoofbeats both lulled and relaxed him, and the second he succumbed to them, images of Faith laughing, her golden hair tossed by the wind, invaded his mind. Frustrated, he’d turned for home.

By the time he’d cleaned up and descended to the dining room for dinner, his frustration had blossomed into fury—at himself for his inability to control his own thoughts when it came to his wife, and at Jon for invading his solitude. Most of all, he was angry because he could no longer deny the fact that he wanted to know what his brother had come to tell him.

When the last course had been served and cleared, Gareth cleared his throat. “Brandy?”

Jon nodded and rose. The two men left the dining room and crossed the corridor to the study. Gareth poured his brother a generous snifter and himself a glass of port. They sat in a pair of dark, comfortable club chairs.

After a moment’s silence, Gareth spoke. “Tell me.”

Jon carefully hid his relief that his brother was finally taking an interest. “There’s speculation,” he said.

“There’s always speculation. It will pass.”

Jon lit a cheroot and inhaled, then blew out the smoke rather grimly. "I agree. But not before they rip Faith to shreds."

The port was doing nothing to ease Gareth's tension. He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I suppose you expect me to do something about that?"

Jon gave him a withering look. "She's family. You married her. Yes, I expect you to do something about it." He waited, watching his brother.

Strumming his fingers on the arm of his chair, Gareth thought about everything. He thought about the vandalism, which had stopped with Faith's departure. He thought about her reaction when he'd accused her of having a lover, and knew a twinge of regret. She'd been shocked, stunned. His mind had so easily leapt to the conclusion that she had a lover, he'd tried and convicted her with virtually no real evidence. Had he been mistaken?

"She may not allow me," he murmured.

Jon watched the emotions play across his brother's face and wisely pressed his advantage. "They think you've abandoned her, so right now she's merely an object of pity. I don't think she's even aware of it yet."

Pain slashed Gareth's features, but he said nothing. His brother sighed.

"It's only a matter of time before she's viewed as fair game by the more unscrupulous members of Society. She's not equipped to handle that, Gareth. One misstep, even with Grace and Amanda standing by, and her reputation will be in tatters. She needs you, Gareth, whether she'll allow it or not."

"I don't think *need* is the correct term," Gareth replied, "but I understand what you're saying." He tossed back the remainder of his port and stood. "I'd rather conduct interviews for a secretary in London in any case. I'll be ready to leave in the morning." He set his glass on the mantel with a firm thud and strode from the room.

Jon watched him go, pensive. He was suddenly very, very happy Amanda's maiden name was not Ackerly.



## Thirty-one

Afternoon, Lady Seth.”

Surprised, Amanda looked up from the letter she was writing, a delighted smile brightening her face. “Gareth! Jon told me you’d come to London to look for a secretary.” *And for your wife*, she added silently.

“Yes. I’m to begin conducting interviews in the morning.” He stepped into the drawing room and looked around. None of the furniture looked as if it would be remotely comfortable for a man of his size, so he selected a love seat that appeared fairly substantial and sat down, feeling rather like a great, hulking beast gingerly picking his way through a china shop.

“Well, I’m happy you’re here.” Amanda looked at him curiously but said no more, sensing instinctively that her brother-in-law had something specific to discuss and was searching for the best way to begin. She was not disappointed.

“I’d like to talk to you about Faith.”

Amanda tilted her head and smiled. “What about her?”

“Do you see her often?”

Amanda hesitated, torn between a wish to bring her friend and her brother-in-law back together and loyalty to Faith, who had expressly stated she did not wish to have anything to do with her husband. “I see her a few times a week,” she finally admitted.

“Ah.” Gareth nodded. He glanced around the room a moment and looked again at his sister-in-law. “Is she...doing well?” He kept his voice even, and his eyes were inscrutable.

Amanda gave him an assessing look, wondering again what had happened in their short marriage to bring Gareth and Faith to this point. Faith had been provokingly reticent, saying only that they were “unsuited.” It did not appear Gareth would be any more forthcoming. Unless...Amanda bit her lip, hiding a smile as an idea dawned. Unless he was provoked.

“Faith,” began Amanda, her tone light, “is having a lovely visit with her sister. It was really very kind of you to understand how terribly bored

she was out in the country with only you for company.”

Gareth raised a brow. “Bored? That’s what she said? That she was bored at Rothmere?”

Amanda barely kept her face composed. “Well, I don’t know that she used those precise words. I think I might have inferred that she was bored when she said that you were ‘dour and not at all disposed to amusement.’ Which,” she added pointedly, “I found difficult to reconcile...until now. You’ve not even smiled at me once since you arrived!” She watched Gareth carefully.

His expression remained neutral, though he felt an unexpected twinge of pain at the way Faith had described him to Amanda. “Yes. Well. I was rather consumed with completing the renovations,” he said. Clearing his throat, he added, “I imagine she has attended social events with you?” A muscle twitched in his jaw.

“Yes, of course she has,” Amanda replied, watching as Gareth began strumming the fingers of his right hand on his thigh. “And she’s just as popular as ever, of course.” She beamed. “You’d really be so proud of her. Quite the sought-after dance partner, our Faith.”

His fingers abruptly stopped their movement, and Amanda looked up to find her brother-in-law staring at her intently. She hastily averted her eyes.

Gareth noted the guilty look on her face and wondered what she was hiding. “I stopped by the Caldwell town house on my way here. I was informed that they weren’t home.”

“No. They went to Pelthamshire for a few days. I think they plan to return this evening.” Amanda said a quick little prayer that Faith had changed her mind about staying in the village and was planning to return with Grace and Trevor. “We are to meet them at the Rutherfords’ ball. Care to join us?”

A ball. Gareth almost grimaced. Coming face-to-face with his wife under the watchful eyes of Society did not appeal for a number of reasons, but he did have to admire the pragmatic aspects. She’d be far less likely to simply ignore him if they were surrounded by hundreds of people. The ever-correct Marchioness of Roth could be counted upon to put her best face forward in all circumstances.

Yes. The more he considered it, the more he realized going to the ball was the better option. An announced visit to her sister's home could be avoided; an unexpected meeting at a public event would put her squarely into his hands. His mind made up, Gareth thanked his sister-in-law for the invitation and agreed to attend, then took his leave.

The problem with his wife handled for the moment, at least in his mind, Gareth spent the ride back to his town house reading through the letters of recommendation he'd received about the men he would interview in the morning to fill the position of his secretary. The candidates all seemed reasonably qualified. He'd already dismissed out of hand any letter glowing with effusive praise for the applicant, concentrating instead on those which outlined in spare, precise words competence and organization. He wanted someone brisk and efficient. Not someone likeable.

The carriage slowed as it approached his home. Gareth tucked the letters under his arm and prepared to disembark, pondering this recent gravitation toward simplicity. Certainly it was at odds with the fun-loving prankster he'd been less than two years ago. He nodded at the footman, who opened the door and put down the steps, and walked slowly inside.

The tree he'd given to Faith in lieu of flowers stood in the foyer, mocking him, and he realized his life change had begun with his wife long before he'd even imagined she might be his; the blistering setdown she'd delivered at her sister's wedding had stuck with him. The inheritance had followed shortly thereafter, and all its responsibilities. He had been forced to mature.

He reached out and touched one of the tree's carefully manicured branches, still adorned with the silly ribbons he'd ordered. Perhaps, he thought to himself, he had become a shade *too* serious.

## Thirty-two

As it turned out, Gareth found it ridiculously easy to slip into a good mood. Amanda's lighthearted, easy banter was soothing, her laughter infectious. And though Jon remained as distant as ever, Gareth felt more relaxed than he'd been in months.

He should have known better.

Not ten minutes after they arrived, Lady Cleo Egerton bore down on him like a ship at full sail, the ever-present feather in her garish turban bobbing along helplessly above. Gareth felt his smile falter as he watched her approach, keeping one eye on the ebony cane she had been known to wield without mercy. He opened his mouth to offer her a carefully polite greeting, but she never gave him a chance.

"You." The single word was an undeniable accusation.

Gareth inclined his head deferentially. "My lady."

Cleo clicked her tongue, disappointment etched across her lined face. "I had high hopes for you after Huntwick so thoroughly botched things with Grace."

Gareth raised an eyebrow. "I'd hardly call a successful marriage botched."

She pounced triumphantly. "So what would you call an *unsuccessful* marriage?" She raised her eyebrows and gave him a scathing look, the undeniable reference to his own marriage unspoken.

His eyes turned cold. "Typical," he responded, refusing to take the bait.

Cleo remained undaunted. She leaned closer and squinted into his eyes, then nodded. "You've decided to do something about this silly arrangement, I see." She tucked her cane under her arm and reached up to straighten her turban. "Good."

Amanda watched the entire exchange with amusement, keeping a careful eye on Gareth. The change in her brother-in-law's demeanor now from that during their conversation in the early afternoon hadn't escaped

her notice. It was clear he'd been thinking things through, a character trait he'd had for years. Whatever his plan, it wouldn't involve rash or thoughtless behavior.

*"The Earl and Countess of Huntwick!"*

At the shouted announcement from the butler at the top of the stairs, Amanda looked away from her brother-in-law and held her breath as Trevor and Grace appeared. They paused and began descending. She let out her breath a moment later when Faith stepped into view.

*"The Marchioness of Roth!"*

Gareth felt a sense of calm envelop him, a feeling that began in the center of his chest and spread outward, as he watched his wife begin her poised descent. His eyes softened to a warm chocolate, and he took an inadvertent step in the direction of the stairs before he realized he had done so. Stopping, he looked around to see if anyone had noticed, and caught Amanda's eye. Her expression was sympathetic.

Slightly annoyed with himself, Gareth looked back at the entrance. Faith had gained the ballroom floor and joined her sister and brother-in-law in greeting guests nearest the stairs.

Trevor's eyes swept the room and widened in surprise when they landed on Gareth. He inclined his head toward Faith and Grace, then nodded imperceptibly when Gareth shook his head, tacitly agreeing that they were not to be told he was here yet. Not that it could be kept from them for long.

Across the room, Horatio Grimsby had also seen Faith's entrance, and quite aware of her husband's presence, was carefully watching everything. He'd noted the arrival of the Marquess of Roth with a mixture of irritation and dismay. That the man had come to collect his wife stood to reason. No man, especially not one of such power and standing, enjoyed the world speculating about his private affairs...and Faith hadn't exactly been cautious in exhibiting how she felt about him. No, the more Horatio thought about it, the more he realized he was going to have to find an opportunity to warn Faith about the need for her to conceal her feelings for him. The last thing he needed was to be maneuvered into a situation that required him to be up before dawn, facing her husband with pistols at twenty paces.

His eyes darted between the two groups, gauging his moment. It came when the Earl of Huntwick bowed over his wife's hand with an affectionate

smile and took his leave of the sisters. Horatio watched the earl make his way through the crowd toward Gareth, then turned his attention back to Grace and Faith. They had linked arms and were strolling in the opposite direction. Faith appeared not to have noticed her husband was in attendance.

Quickly, Horatio moved to intercept the pair, catching the ladies just as they reached the edge of the dance floor. "Evening, Lady Roth, Lady Huntwick." He pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his nose and bowed slightly.

Faith smiled at him. "Good evening, Lord Jameson. I trust you're enjoying the ball?"

Grace smiled at Lord Jameson, too, but it was a more distant, polite smile. She'd meant to talk to Faith about the fact that Horatio's attentions were becoming a shade too marked, but hadn't had a chance to speak to her alone during their short stay in Pelthamshire, and it was certainly not a conversation she wished to have in front of Trevor. Faith had no idea she was being anything except friendly to a man who didn't seem to enjoy much kindness from others. Jameson, in Grace's opinion, was taking advantage of her sister's gentle charity.

"Might I trouble you for a dance, Lady Roth?"

Faith kept a smile on her face while searching desperately for an excuse. None surfaced, however, so she resigned herself to a single whirl in the cause of duty. "Thank you," she said graciously. "That would be lovely, my lord."

Grace rolled her eyes and looked around the room for someone to talk with while her sister danced. She nodded at several acquaintances and broke into a genuine smile when she saw Amanda Lloyd standing with a group near Aunt Cleo. But when she looked to Amanda's right, she sucked in her breath and reached back blindly for Faith's arm, unable to take her eyes off the group across the room.

"Faith!" she hissed, then repeated herself in a more urgent tone.

"Pardon me," said her sister to Horatio and changed the focus of her attention. "What in the world?"

Grace nudged her in the ribs with an elbow and jerked her head in the direction she wanted Faith to look. Faith followed her sister's gaze.

To someone who did not know her well, it would not have appeared that Faith had any reaction to seeing her husband in London when she'd thought him safely tucked away in the country. Grace, however, knew her sister quite well. She recognized the nearly invisible tightening of her lips, the sudden chill perfection of her posture. Faith was almost regally incensed. And it didn't help that Gareth was looking at her at the precise moment she saw him. He didn't move, didn't look away. He simply waited to see what Faith would do.

Instead of so much as nodding to acknowledge his presence, Faith smiled tightly, then leaned down to whisper something to her sister. Then, of all things, she laid her hand on the arm of the Earl of Jameson and strolled out onto the dance floor with him.

Gareth watched his wife and her dance partner begin, then turned away. It wasn't until Faith's sister walked up and greeted him that he was able to acknowledge the fact that he was coldly furious. He nodded tightly at her warm hello and looked for his wife on the dance floor again. She was smiling at Horatio, engaged in an animated conversation with him while they danced, and she didn't spare a single glance in his direction. He continued watching until the waltz drew to a close and his treacherous wife and Jameson walked off the floor together. It seemed he had found Faith's lover.

"Excuse me," Gareth said, his voice clipped. "I'm going to step outside for some air."

The group watched him go. Trevor and Jon exchanged looks over their wives' heads, silently agreeing that it wasn't necessary to get involved. Grace and Amanda weren't sure what to think.

"Honestly, Grace, how *could* she?" Amanda asked in a whisper.

Grace shook her head. "I think there is a great deal we don't know. We need to find a way to get them together, to make them interact."

Amanda shook her head. "Gareth will leave first. He's not just angry with her; he's hurt about something, too. He hasn't told me what it is, but there's so much more behind the way he's acting than just a spat between a husband and wife who don't know one another very well."

"She loves him," promised Grace quietly.

"And he loves her," agreed Amanda.

The pair glanced at Faith, who had finished her dance with Horatio and was now standing alone, looking somehow utterly lost in the midst of the crush of people surrounding her.

“Terrace?” Grace looked determined.

“Terrace,” Amanda agreed, and off they went without a word to their husbands.

The men watched them go. “This can’t be good,” said Trevor. He raised an eyebrow and kept an eye on his wife’s distinctive gold-red hair as she made her way, with Amanda, toward Faith. Jon shook his head. The women reached their destination, and each linked an arm through Faith’s, herding her inexorably toward their destination.

“Terrace?” Jon’s voice was grim.

Trevor nodded. “Terrace. Definitely,” he replied.

“But I just *got* here,” protested Faith with a little laugh. “I really don’t need fresh air yet.”

“You look flushed after your dance,” said Grace, decisively.

“Yes,” agreed Amanda. “A bit of night air will be just the thing to put the roses back into your cheeks.”

Faith raised an eyebrow. “I’m flushed *and* pale?”

“Um, w-well,” stammered Amanda. “You have a pallor. Beneath the... um...flush.” She looked at Grace for help.

Grace snorted. “You’re not very good at this.”

Faith stopped abruptly, looking back and forth between her friend and sister. “Is Gareth out on the terrace?”

The conspirators looked at one another guiltily but said nothing.

“I’m not going out there. I have no intention of seeing him tonight...or on any other night, for that matter.” Faith pulled her arms from theirs and turned to walk away, only to find her path blocked by Trevor and Jon. “Oh, for goodness’ sake! You’re in on it, too?” She crossed her arms and looked around, noting the interested stares from the other ball attendees. “We’re beginning to attract attention.”

“All the more reason to go out on the terrace,” said Grace with an impish smirk.

“Hush, Grace,” said Amanda and Trevor together.

“What’s on the terrace?”



Faith stiffened and whirled around at her husband's voice. She raked the rest of the group with a contemptuous glare and lifted her chin. "Fresh air, my lord," she answered. "I am, apparently, rather flushed and in need of it. Will you excuse me, please?" She executed a little half curtsy, narrowed her eyes at her sister, and stepped around the group to escape through the French doors.

Grace moved to follow, but Gareth caught her arm. "I'll go. This needs to be handled."

He stepped outside and closed the doors behind him, muffling the sounds of the ball within. Faith wasn't in sight. He sighed and walked down the terrace to the left, where he knew he'd find a shadowy alcove.

Faith heard the measured footsteps approaching and closed her eyes. This was not an encounter she was prepared to handle. For once in her life, she was willing to run away from a problem instead of solving it, and she meant to turn her back on this one forever. She did not intend to ever again allow herself to feel the sort of pain she'd felt after Gareth accused her of having a lover.

"Faith."

She opened her eyes and sighed, but did not look at him. She stared instead out into the darkness. "Yes, my lord?"

God, she was beautiful. He cleared his throat awkwardly, wincing inside at the formal way she addressed him. "I thought perhaps we could begin again."

Faith shook her head a little and looked down. "No, please," she said, her voice low.

Gareth leaned forward, unsure he'd heard correctly. "No?"

She finally looked up at him. Her eyes were clear and calm. "No. We are continually 'beginning again.' I'll be whatever you want me to be, Gareth. Your wife, your former wife, whichever. But I will not be *with* you ever again."

He narrowed his eyes. This was not at all going as he'd planned. He'd thought to apologize, to cajole, perhaps, and to entice. He hadn't imagined she would flatly refuse to cooperate. Or that it would make him feel so out of his depth. He gave her a hard look. "You really don't have a choice, Faith."

“Legally, no. I do not. But I know from what you have told me that you don’t want to be trapped in a loveless marriage. You want nothing less than what your parents had.”

“Are you telling me you don’t love me? You’re admitting that you never can?”

Faith swallowed past the sudden lump in her throat, her heart pounding. She shook her head. “I—”

“Say it!” he bit out. His eyes were a glittering, dark obsidian in this shadowy nook, and when he took a step toward her, Faith instinctively shrank back. “You have to tell me.”

Anger sparked, both with Gareth and with herself for almost cowering before him. She drew herself up to her full height and leaned forward. “I don’t love you.” Her voice, firm and sure, rang out in the stillness. “I never shall.”

Gareth stopped his advance, stared hard into her eyes. They were brimming with unshed tears, awash in pain, at odds with her harsh words. It surprised him. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” she returned, her voice tired. She walked forward, tried to step around him, but he stepped in front of her. “Let me go, please.”

“No.” A muscle worked in his jaw. He stared over her head into the blackness beyond the balustrade. “It doesn’t matter that you don’t love me. You are my wife, and I’m taking you home.”

She shook her head again, harder. “No. I won’t go.”

“You *will* go.” He grasped her upper arm. “Your choice: If you want to save your reputation, you can come willingly, and you can smile at me the way you smiled at your lover while you danced with him.” He watched her closely. “Or I can drag you out of here. I’ll toss you over my shoulder, if I have to. One way or the other, you’re coming home with me. Tonight.”

Faith pressed her lips together and squared her shoulders. “You...are vile,” she said through clenched teeth, her tone laced with contempt. “But I’ll go willingly. For now.”

“Then smile, Lady Roth. We’ll go say our good-byes.” Gareth stepped aside to allow her to pass before following her back inside.

Unseen by either the marquess or the marchioness, Horatio Grimsby stepped out of the shadows and watched them go, his eyes narrowed on

Gareth's back.

## Thirty-three

**T**hough it was not a great distance from the ball to Gareth's town house, the usual snarl of evening traffic made the ride uncomfortably long. Faith and Gareth rode in silence, their eyes averted, looking anywhere but at one another. A couple of times Gareth cleared his throat as though he intended to say something. Faith jumped in reaction the first time. The second, she merely blinked and looked out the window.

At home, Gareth exited the coach and reached in to politely help Faith disembark. She took his hand and gracefully descended, then allowed him to escort her up the stairs and through the door the butler had opened when he heard the vehicle arrive. Faith surrendered her wrap without a word and stood waiting for him to indicate what would happen next.

Placing a hand on the small of her back, Gareth guided her through the foyer to the curving staircase.

"Where are we going?" Faith asked.

"My chamber."

Faith stopped halfway up the stairs. "I do not wish to be alone with you."

Gareth raised a brow. "And I do not wish to have the servants overhear our discussion."

She frowned. His words made perfect sense. Still... "Surely there is somewhere else we can go and not be overheard." She took another step, compelled by the pressure of his hand on her back. "The gardens, perhaps," she offered.

Gareth made a face at this reminder that although she was his wife, she had never been to his home here in Town. "There is no garden here, Faith. I rather thought that might be something you'd take an interest in developing."

Faith's heart wrenched. The thought of being given a free hand to create something beautiful here, to make this her home as well as his in every way, was something she would have dearly loved. Distracted by such

thoughts, she resumed climbing the stairs and allowed Gareth to guide her down the carpeted hall to his chamber.

Once inside, he closed the doors and turned to face her. "I'm willing to listen to your explanation now, Faith."

Instantly, all her little domestic imaginings fled, replaced by the same weary anger she'd harbored since she'd left Rothmere. She lifted her chin and looked back at him in resignation. "I have no idea what you wish me to say, my lord."

"You could begin by telling me why."

She shook her head. "I cannot give you an explanation for something that does not exist. Nor do I wish to defend myself against unfounded accusations."

"You've never denied the accusation."

"There is nothing to deny."

Gareth stared at her a long moment, then shook his head. "What do you propose we do, then, princess?"

Faith took a deep breath. "I'd like to go home to Pelthamshire. To stay."

He narrowed his eyes. "It is your intention to let our marriage simply stagnate? You live your life while I live mine?"

His voice was dangerously soft, and Faith felt the underlying anger in each of his few words. Still, she plunged recklessly ahead, her voice only trembling a little. "I'd be perfectly willing to look the other way, my lord, should you decide to take a mistress."

His anger, simmering just below the surface, abruptly reached the boiling point. Gareth took a step toward her. "Wouldn't that be nice for you, princess?" His voice was nearly a snarl. "You could keep your lover and soothe your guilt at denying me an heir with the fact that I've also taken a lover."

Faith said nothing, but two bright spots of color appeared on her cheeks, and her hands balled into little fists at her sides. She resisted the urge to retreat when he took another step forward.

"You still do not deny it?" He reached out, grasping her chin in his hand.

She gasped in fearful reaction, but met his eyes bravely. "You have no proof."

At her words, Gareth smiled. Slowly, angrily. "Proof," he repeated. "You've denied me that, too, haven't you?" But proof he could get...and easily. He remembered the way she'd responded to him in the caretaker's cottage and knew he could evoke that response again, especially if she didn't see it coming.

Deliberately, he released her chin but did not remove his hand, sliding it instead to softly cup her cheek.

Faith flinched at the sudden gentling of her husband's touch. She caught her breath, tried to keep her eyes on his, then closed them, afraid he'd see the sudden uncertainty she felt. Her heart fluttered a bit before it began pounding so hard she was sure he would hear. "What are you doing?"

"Faith..."

Her eyes flew open at the soft sound of her name on his lips. "M-my lord?" She hated the breathy quality of her voice, hated the way the floor was tilting away beneath her, hated the fact that she needed to reach out just now and place her hand on his chest to keep her balance.

He covered that hand with his, began stroking her cheek with his thumb. "I'm going to kiss you," he warned, and stepped closer.

"No!" she protested, but the sound was cut off as he took her face between both of his hands and bent forward to capture her lips with his. A small, soft noise, almost a whimper, escaped her throat as she struggled one last time to gain control.

The struggle was short. His scent assailed her, made it impossible for her to think. All she could do was react and follow her instincts. With a sigh, she melted against him, slid her hands around his chest, and tilted her head back. She kissed him in return, her lips melting into his, everything else falling away. She kissed him further, pouring into that kiss all her hopes and dreams that their marriage could be one of love and gentle beauty. She kissed him back, not knowing what she evoked.

Gareth gathered her close, slid one hand into the hair at the nape of her neck, and slipped his tongue along the crease between her lips. Immediately, she parted them for him.

"Yes," he murmured. "Kiss me, princess. Just like that."

Softly, shyly, her tongue met his. Gareth moaned and deepened the kiss, his tongue plunging inside her mouth, tasting her, coaxing a response.

Without breaking the kiss, he swept her up in his arms and walked with her to the bed.

“Gareth?” She whispered his name uncertainly when he trailed his lips across her cheek while settling her against the pillows. His hands fell away a moment, and she whimpered a little. The loss of contact was fleeting, though, and her fears vanished when he joined her on the bed and stretched out beside her.

Softly he smoothed back the hair that had fallen across her cheek. “So beautiful,” he murmured. His passion-dark eyes caught and held hers, and she saw that he meant it. She turned toward him, nuzzling her cheek against his shirt. He moved his hand from her face and settled it, heavy and warm, on her rib cage. Tenderly, he kissed the top of her golden head, knowing that although he’d set out with the intention to seduce her, he had now become, through her innocent, unknowing responses, the one seduced.

“Faith, listen to me.”

She nodded, her cheek rubbing softly against his chest.

“I’ll not do this without your agreement.” She became still, held her breath. “I need you to release me from the promise I made to your sister.”

Faith bit into her lower lip and tried to think, but it was hard, so hard, when she was pressed up against him like this, when she could breathe him in, when she could draw from his warmth and from his strength. The loneliness she’d felt since they first quarreled was receding, and she didn’t want it back, didn’t ever want to feel that yawning emptiness again. And yet...

“I’m scared,” she whispered in a small voice.

Gareth’s heart slammed into his ribs. He forgot, utterly forgot, that she’d betrayed him, lied to him, and forsaken her vows. In that instant, all he wanted in all the world was to protect her, to make this one beautiful girl feel safe from everything, even from him.

“I know,” he replied, his voice husky. He pulled back a little. “Look at me.”

Faith lifted her face, her gray eyes luminous with vulnerability.

“We have now,” he said. “And we have forever.” He paused, searching for words that weren’t jarring or hurtful. “We can’t change what we’ve done and said to one another. We can only try to let it go...if you would like.”

Slowly, she nodded. She opened her mouth to say the words that would release him from his promise, then stopped. “Will we—?” She halted in midquestion, lifted her hand, and placed her trembling fingers softly on his lips. “Yes,” she murmured, answering her own unfinished question, then added, “Yes, *please*.”

Gareth groaned and kissed her fingertips, then took her lips again in a long, drugging kiss that chased away her fears and banished any remaining doubt. His mouth left hers to travel over her chin, blazing a path of sensation down the slim column of her neck to her collarbone. He ran his lips along it, reveling in the feel of her soft skin over the deceptive strength of that delicate bone.

Faith gasped in pure pleasure, felt liquid heat uncurl from the center of her being and blossom outward in waves of engulfing sensation. Every inch of her felt alive. Her skin tingled with awareness, thirsty to be touched. Her hands almost ached with the need to touch him, a need she knew he shared.

She felt Gareth slide a hand up her torso, pause a bare second, and continue, the movement of his fingers finally ceasing as they curved lightly around and caressed her breast. She arched her back, lifting that sensitive mound more firmly into his cupped palm.

Gareth felt his wife’s nipple rise proudly and press into the center of his hand through the fabric of her gown, and he knew he could wait no longer. He needed to feel her skin against his, needed to find all her secret, sensitive places with his hands—and with his lips and with his tongue.

Impatient, he tugged at her bodice, pulling the delicate fabric down until one creamy breast slipped free. He dipped his head and caught the dusky pink tip in his mouth. Faith cried out softly, a sweet sound in reaction that crept into his awareness and strengthened his arousal. He released her nipple, gave it one last lick, and raised his head.

“I want to see you. All of you.” His voice was hoarse with desire, rough with aching need.

Faith opened her eyes slightly, smiled a little. “Now?” It wasn’t really a question. She’d never felt so warm, so languid, and she didn’t want this to ever end. Her husband’s hands moved deftly, skillfully divesting her of her gown, her chemise, and her stockings. He rained kisses on every bit of her flesh as he exposed it, coaxing her more deeply into the magic they’d begun to create.



When he'd freed her of her garments, he stood smiling down at her as he began to remove his own clothing. Faith curled on her side and watched him, her eyes filled with wonder. She'd seen him nude, briefly, the night they were married, and had looked away, embarrassed. She wanted none of that this time, nothing hidden or wrong between them.

When he returned to the bed, he smoothed a hand down her side and eased her onto her back. His hands roved softly over her flesh. "I love touching you, princess," he whispered, a note of awe in his voice. "You're so fair where I'm dark." He splayed his fingers wide on her tummy. "The contrast between my skin and yours is beautiful."

In answer, Faith placed her hand in the center of his chest and nodded. The crisp hair tickled the vees formed at the junctures of her fingers and made her smile. That smile faded into a look of surprise as Gareth slowly slid his hand lower. Instinctively, she moved to close her legs, then stopped and forced herself to relax.

And then she couldn't think at all. He touched her, his hands sliding down and inside and over her slick folds until she was writhing in pleasure, awash in feelings she hadn't known existed. His fingers danced and brought her to the edge of...*The edge of what?* she wondered.

He stopped and stroked her softly, watching her face, waiting for the beginning of that sweet explosion. When she was almost there, he stopped and watched some more. She calmed, slipped back away from the edge. She opened her lips to ask him questions, but he began again, this time taking her up and over until she cried out, her world spinning and fluttering and turning inside out.

Finally, Faith settled and opened her eyes to find him watching her, a small smile playing about his mouth. He laced his fingers through hers and said, "I want to make love to you."

Faith nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Gareth placed her hand on him, wrapped her fingers around the hard evidence of his arousal. Her eyes filled with wonder, and she reveled in the freedom he allowed as her fingers roved over his flesh.

"It's like rose petals over marble," she whispered, then blushed and bit her lip. She looked up at him, trying to assess his reaction, and caught her breath. His brown eyes smoldered from beneath half-closed lids, passion

and need sparking in their chocolate depths. She stroked him once and then again, until he growled her name and arched into her next stroke.

Gareth endured it all a few moments longer, fighting to control the urge to take her, to sheathe himself inside her and fill her with his seed. He forced himself to savor the maddening sensation of her fingers on him, innocently stoking fires she did not understand, until he could take it no longer. He sat up and took her lips in a fierce, possessive kiss, bearing her back down on the bed beneath him. "Now, princess," he whispered, his voice tight with insistent, aching need.

Gently, he pushed her back into the pillows and settled himself between her legs, his hardness poised at the entrance to her body. He captured her eyes with his, allowed himself to fall into their trusting, silvery depths and then thrust once, plunging deep inside her body.

Faith's face contorted and she cried out, a sharp, pained sound.

Gareth held himself rigid and still, then closed his eyes and threw his head back. The muscles in his neck stood out taut, his face a mask of tortured recrimination. "*Oh, my God!*" he breathed, then forced himself to look at the girl who lay shocked and unmoving beneath him. Carefully, he eased himself to the bed next to her, still joined to her body, and gathered her into his arms.

"Faith?"

Already her pain was fading, replaced by the curious stretching sensation of being filled for the first time. Her eyes met his, questioning, and she wriggled. Gareth groaned. "Don't...Oh, please don't," he breathed.

Her eyes clouded, and he touched his lips softly to her forehead, smoothed her hair back with both hands, and brought her lips to his. He kissed her tenderly and began moving carefully within her. Her breath caught, and he felt her incisors bite gently into his lower lip. "Yes, princess?"

"Yes," she replied against his mouth on an exhaled breath.

Gareth flexed his hips before settling a hand on her trim backside, applying pressure, teaching her how to move with him. "Together, love," he whispered.

She was an apt pupil, and soon her short breaths lengthened into gasps, and then into moans. They moved as one, neither able to tell where one

stopped and the other began, words tumbling between them, incoherent and dear, until he felt her tighten around him. Her eyes grew round.

“Gareth!”

His name became one long sound, and he thrust deep inside her one last time, then cried out, spilling himself in bursts of agonizing pleasure at the entrance to her womb. Everything fell away until there was nothing more, nothing except her and him and every single place they touched.

Soon, he felt her stir. He enfolded her in his arms and rolled onto his back, taking her with him, their limbs still sweetly tangled, and settled her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair. “I’m sorry I hurt you, princess.”

“I knew it would...I m-mean...” She stammered a little and blushed. “Grace told me it might hurt a little the first time.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, regret washing through him. “I should have made it better for you. I just didn’t know.”

The instant the words left his lips, he wished them back. Faith stiffened in his arms but said nothing. He waited a moment, then pulled his head back and slipped a finger under her chin to tilt her face up to his.

Her eyes were grave and troubled. “That...?” She chewed on her lower lip a bit. “That’s what you thought I did with...with someone else?” The pain in her voice was unmistakable, and Gareth’s heart twisted with remorse. There was nothing he could say. And so, because he didn’t want a lie—even in the form of an unanswered question—between them, he finally nodded.

Faith stared at him, her mind spinning. The full import of what he’d thought when he’d decided she had a lover, the depth of the betrayal of which he’d thought her capable, was astonishing. She thought of what they had just shared, the beauty and the passion, and realized suddenly that no matter how it turned out, he’d begun their lovemaking with the express intention of proving her false.

Her eyes, only moments before a luminous shade of spun silver awash with wonder, clouded. Without another word, she wriggled off his chest and turned away, reaching blindly for the blankets, which she pulled up around her slim shoulders.

Gareth reached a hand toward her, then pulled it back, unsure of whether he’d make things better or worse by touching her. When she didn’t move, he rolled out of the bed and reached for his dressing gown, shrugging

into it and tying the belt at his waist. He looked once more at the still form huddled beneath the covers and quietly left the room.

As soon as she knew her husband was gone, Faith released the hold she'd had on her emotions. She turned her face into the pillow and began to cry, her shoulders heaving with the force of her sobs. She cried until she could cry no more and fell asleep, exhausted by the weeks of emotional turmoil that had culminated in this.

Gareth made his way down to his study, anger building as he went, anger he directed entirely inward. He was a fool. A sublime fool. He opened the door, pushing it inward so hard that it crashed back into the wall, headed straight for the sideboard, upended a crystal tumbler, and poured himself a generous glass of port. He tossed it back in one swallow and started to pour another, then caught sight of his reflection in the mirror over the fireplace.

Self-hatred and rage overtook him. With an angry roar, he threw the glass in his hand at the face in the mirror, but felt no relief with the shattering of the glass and the splintering of his image. With a groan, he braced both hands against the wall and closed his eyes, hoping to quell the steady parade of torturous images in his head. Try as he might, they just kept coming. He opened his eyes, reached for another glass and the bottle.

If nothing else, he'd find refuge and solace in oblivion.

## Thirty-four

Faith woke with a start. The room was dark and all was quiet, yet she could sense that something was wrong. Something was out of place.

Then she remembered: *she* was out of place. She was in Gareth's home, in Gareth's bed, and she and Gareth had just... She sat up, abruptly and completely awake, and looked at the empty side of the bed. Her eyes filled but she blinked hard, silently willing the tears away. She had cried enough. It was time to find a way to fix the problems. Or end them.

Resolute, she pushed back the covers and slipped from bed. Her clothing was scattered ignominiously across the floor. Faith blushed at the memory of how Gareth had removed those garments piece by piece, kissing and nibbling, savoring each small exposure of her body as he went. With a firm shake of her head, she pushed the memory away and bent to retrieve her gown and chemise. They were all she had to wear, and she certainly did not intend to go traipsing about the town house nude in search of her husband.

A small sound near the doorway made her whirl in alarm, clutching her chemise to her naked breasts. Her eyes probed the darkness but detected nothing.

Quickly, she dressed. Ignoring her stockings, she began looking for her slippers. She found one near the nightstand but did not see the other. With a sigh, she knelt and looked under the bed. Sure enough, it was there, just beyond her fingertips unless she stretched. While she was doing precisely that, she heard the door quietly open.

She peered in that direction from under the bed. A pair of boots entered the room and began walking toward her. A childish urge to slide under the bed and hide gripped her. Faith suppressed a wayward giggle. She grabbed her shoe and stood, shaking her hair out of her face as she did.

"I was just coming to look for—" She stopped in midsentence and stared. It wasn't Gareth coming around the end of the bed toward her. It was Horatio Grimsby, a determined look on his face.

Shock rooted her in place, and he was upon her before it even occurred to Faith that she should scream or run or do *something*. He reached up and covered her mouth with one hand while pushing her back against the wall with the other. Faith dropped her shoes and began to fight.

“Stop it, my dear. Listen to me!” hissed Horatio.

Her eyes wide, Faith shook her head. She reached up with both hands and wildly grasped his wrist, trying to pull his hand away from her mouth.

“Don’t struggle so hard, for God’s sake. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Faith stopped fighting a moment and stared at him in disbelief.

“I’m here to rescue you. I saw the way your husband forced you to leave the ball. Shameful, really, the way he treated you.” Horatio smiled tightly. “I would never have spoken to you like that, my love.” He turned her face a little toward the window so that he could see her eyes more clearly. “Promise me you won’t scream.” She nodded, and he cautiously lifted his hand but didn’t release his hold on her.

“You were on the terrace?”

He nodded. “Yes. It was sweet of you to follow me out there after our dance, and unfortunate that your odious husband showed up when he did. I was obliged to retreat into a shadowy corner and listen to him speak to you in that degrading manner.” His eyes turned sympathetic. “No wonder you came back to London to find me.”

Faith forced herself to relax, to try to breathe normally, even though her heart was pounding in her chest. The fact that he thought she had come back to London just to find him told her that Horatio had quite obviously lost his mind. “How,” she asked, her voice carefully neutral, “did you manage to get in here and find me?” She had no idea where Gareth had gone or if he had even stayed in the town house after he left the bedroom.

“I simply waited until all the lights were out, then came in through the service door off the alley.” Faith nodded but said nothing, encouraging him to continue. “Your husband, by the way, is quite unconscious, downstairs in his study.”

Fear quaked through her. “Gareth? Unconscious?” Her voice sounded a little shrill, and a look of annoyance crossed Horatio’s face. Faith counted slowly to three and forced herself to sound calm. “Is he hurt?”

Horatio shook his head. “No. He’s utterly foxed,” he said, disgust lacing his tone. “I made sure he was completely passed out before I began

looking for you. It felt a bit like poking a tiger with a stick, but he didn't wake, so all is well." He allowed his grip on Faith to loosen a bit. "I was afraid you were going to be uncooperative...out of a sense of duty, of course. It would really have been inconvenient had I found it necessary to kill a fellow peer of the realm tonight."

Faith's eyes widened.

Thoughtfully, Horatio drew his eyebrows together. "Perhaps I should do so anyway while I have the chance. It would keep him from coming after you."

Terror washed through her, icy and dreadful. "Oh, no," she said hastily. "I don't think that will be at all necessary. He won't come after me. He really cannot abide me, you know."

Lord Jameson squinted at her through his spectacles as though trying to assess the level of her sincerity.

"Maybe we should just get out of here before he wakes," she added, forcing herself to give a disarming little smile.

Horatio stared at her a moment longer, then finally relaxed completely and loosened his grip. He reached down, grasped her hand, and turned to lead her from the room. But as his glance fell on the rumpled bed, he sucked in his breath.

Faith followed his gaze. There on the bedclothes was clear evidence of the fact that Gareth had taken her virginity.

Horatio shook his head. "Oh, Faith."

She closed her eyes and looked down as if ashamed, worried that he could tell her mind was otherwise engaged, occupied with finding a way out of this situation. She had to get Horatio away from the town house before he changed his mind and decided to harm Gareth while he was unable to defend himself after all. "I'm sorry," she murmured, hoping to pacify him.

"Oh, my sweet darling." Horatio turned sympathetic eyes on her. "You have no reason to apologize. That bastard raped you."

At the word *raped*, Faith recoiled as if physically struck. She opened her mouth automatically to deny the accusation, then closed it again. "Can we just go, please?" She made her voice sound as small and bewildered as she could.

Without another word, Horatio took her hand.

"Wait," she said. "My shoes."

He allowed her to stoop and retrieve them and watched her slip them on. For a moment Faith considered running, then realized it was a horrible idea. Not only was she completely unfamiliar with the layout of the town house, but even if she managed to get away or to find somewhere to hide, she'd be leaving her unconscious husband alone with a madman. She straightened and nodded. "I'm ready," she said.

Horatio led her quietly from the room and down the hall to the stairs. After looking cautiously for any activity on the floor below, they descended and made their way down the foyer. Faith, to her credit, managed to pass what she assumed was the half-open door to Gareth's study without even glancing inside.



## Thirty-five

**M**y lord?”

Gareth, seated on the edge of burgundy leather club chair, lifted his head from hands and squinted at Desmond. “If you haven’t come with a ridiculously large glass of water or a pistol with which I can dispatch myself from this misery, I don’t want to hear it.” He dropped his head back into his hands.

For once, Desmond had no ill-tempered retort. Instead, he stood silent, his gaze sweeping the normally well-ordered room. It looked and smelled as though a riotous party had occurred during the night. Chairs were moved from their usual places, the mirror over the fireplace was shattered, and shards of glass littered the hearth, both from the mirror and from the tumbler Gareth had thrown. Balls of wadded-up parchment were scattered around the desk, upon which an ink pot had been overturned, its contents bleeding a dark stain across the blotter.

When Desmond didn’t reply, Gareth looked up. “What is it?”

“My lord, the Earl and Countess of Seth have arrived.”

“Well, tell them I am not in.”

“I did, as they were quite unannounced.” He was unable to resist giving Gareth an accusing look. “They have insisted upon waiting, my lord.” The unspoken implication hung in the air that this was an unwanted complication to the butler’s day.

Gareth sighed and unsteadily stood. “Where are they?”

“I put them in the salon with—”

Before he could finish, the door opened behind him and Grace appeared, followed closely by a rather sheepish-looking Amanda. Their husbands followed more slowly, Jonathon glowering and Trevor smirking.

“—the Earl and Countess of Huntwick,” Desmond finished. He gave Grace a look of disdain. “Who were *also* unannounced,” he added.

Grace stepped around the butler, who turned and left the room, muttering under his breath. She ignored him. “Good day, my lord.” She

stopped abruptly and stared open-mouthed at the mess.

Amanda nearly ran into her. "My goodness, Gareth, it looks as though someone has been brawling in here!"

Grace's brows snapped together. "Where's Faith?"

"Asleep, I presume," replied Gareth. "Which is where I'm going as well, if you will all excuse me."

"Asleep?" Grace's voice took on a note of surprise. "But it is late afternoon," she protested.

"Perhaps, my dear, Faith was up rather late," put in Trevor, who was clearly enjoying the situation.

"Indeed," agreed Jonathon. "We should all apologize and take our leave." He gave his wife a stern look.

"It's late afternoon?" Everyone turned to look at Gareth, who was staring at the windows. No one had come in to open the curtains while he slept off his excesses, and the room was still shrouded in gloom. He glanced at Grace, his brow furrowed. "Faith hasn't been to see you?"

Grace shook her head, her eyes growing wide with alarm. When Gareth left the room and headed for the stairs with long, ground-eating strides, she grabbed Amanda's hand and followed, tugging her friend helplessly along with her.

Gareth was already halfway up the stairs, taking them two at a time in his haste to reach the second floor. Amanda and Grace followed more slowly, encumbered by their skirts. By the time they reached the top, Gareth had disappeared down the hall. The two women followed, glancing into each room as they passed until they found him, standing just inside the doorway of the master suite.

Grace pushed past him. "Where's Faith?" she repeated.

"She's not here," said Gareth tightly.

"I can see that she's not here. Tell me where she is."

Gareth gave her a scathing look. "If I knew, I wouldn't have come looking for her. She was in that bed when I went downstairs last night."

"And got drunk," accused Grace hotly.

Gareth narrowed his eyes. "I seem to recall finding Hunt well into his cups a time or two while he was courting you. Is driving men to drink a trait peculiar to Ackerly women?"

Grace glared.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Jonathon drunk,” offered Amanda pleasantly.

“I don’t *get* drunk,” agreed Jon as he walked into the room.

Trevor appeared as well and nudged his friend, tilting his head toward Grace and Gareth. Grace looked ready to launch herself at the marquess, who looked as though he’d welcome the fight. “So, where’s Faith?”

Both angry faces snapped toward Trevor. “She’s not here!”

“Well, I can see *that*,” he muttered.

Amanda’s lips twitched, and Jonathon gave her a baleful look. She quickly composed herself. “Faith is not given to acting rashly,” she said. “If she isn’t here, and she hasn’t been to see Grace, then she’ll obviously be at the next logical place.”

Grace shook her head. “We came here straight from a visit with Aunt Cleo.”

Gareth frowned. “She mentioned going home to Pelthamshire.”

Again, Grace gave a negative shake of her head. “We’ve just come from there, and she’d decided to return with us. Besides, she might leave *you*, my lord, without a word of explanation, but she would never leave town without letting me or Aunt Cleo know where she was going.”

Gareth began pacing the room, his brow furrowed in thought. He stopped a moment and looked at the unmade bed, the memory of how he’d taken Faith’s virginity in such a clumsy manner tugging at him. The evidence on the sheets taunted him, and he closed his eyes, regret and self-recrimination stamped on his features. The two forgotten couples conversed in whispers near the door, watching him carefully.

He opened his eyes and stepped closer to the bed, the pounding in his head forgotten, intending to flip the covers up to cover the soiled linens, certain Faith wouldn’t have wanted even her closest loved ones to know what had transpired the evening before. As he reached for the covers, he caught sight of something lying on the floor next to the far side of the bed and stiffened. In two long strides, he was there.

He bent, swept the objects off the floor, and straightened, holding Faith’s stockings in his hand, then looked at the group across the room. “She didn’t dress normally,” he announced.

Grace’s eyes grew round and riveted on the delicate lengths of silk in his hands. “No,” she agreed. “Something forced her to dress quickly. She

left off her stockings to save time.”

Gareth nodded. “Something,” he echoed thoughtfully. “Or someone.” And then, just like that, all the evidence added up for him. The cuff link, the vandalism at Rothemere, the near proposal, the way he’d hung near and basked in Faith’s kindness...

Grace tilted her head to the side, her mind spinning. A memory, vague and dim, niggled at her consciousness, something to which she felt she should have paid closer attention, something she might have noticed and dismissed. She frowned. What was it? Gareth watched the changing expressions on her face, waiting for her to come to the same conclusion he had.

And then her face cleared. *The dance last night!* Grace sucked in her breath and raised wide blue eyes to Gareth’s inscrutable brown ones. “Lord Jameson,” she said on an exhaled breath. Jameson had been acting particularly strange, and he was the only culprit she could imagine.

Gareth nodded tightly, and Grace wondered at his lack of expression, at the missing sense of urgency in his demeanor.

Jon stepped forward. “If this is true,” he said quietly to his brother, “if she left here with Jameson, it was not as his lover. Get that out of your mind.”

The marquess shrugged. “I suppose that remains to be seen,” he replied. He looked at Trevor, then Jon. “Would either of you care to accompany me? I think I’m about to pay a house call.”

## Thirty-six

Faith opened her eyes and winced. Her head was pounding, and her arms and legs felt strangely heavy. She frowned, wondering at these oddities in her waking ritual. She reached for one of the many pillows that littered her bed, intending to pull it over her face and go back to sleep, but her questing fingers found nothing.

Reluctant to open her eyes into what she was sure would be a provokingly bright, beautiful morning, Faith groaned. *I must have slept roughly*, she thought, and knocked the pillows from the bed. A restless sleep would also explain the headache.

Then she remembered Horatio.

Faith sat up abruptly, her eyes flying open to encounter a dim room. She tried to cry out, but her mouth was dry as cotton and her tongue felt huge. All she managed was a pathetic little croak.

“Laudanum.”

Startled, Faith’s head snapped to the side, prompting another wave of excruciating pain. She could barely make out the figure in the shadowy corner of the room, but the voice was decidedly female.

“Why?” Faith managed to whisper, despite the arid condition of her mouth and throat.

“Because Horatio may be vulnerable to your considerable charm and, to my mind, rather bland beauty, but I am not. I knew it was only a matter of time before you stopped playing along with him and became difficult.” The voice paused. “There’s a glass of water on the table beside the bed, if you’d like it. Not that I care about your comfort. I simply don’t wish to listen to you try to croak out your side of this conversation.”

Faith reached for the water and brought the glass to her lips before she remembered the tea. Obviously, the tea Horatio had offered her when they arrived was laced with the laudanum. She sniffed at the water suspiciously.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, drink it. It’s just water. You really *are* a prim, icy creature, aren’t you?” There was a rustling sound as the unknown

woman shifted in her chair. "I honestly don't know what either Gareth or Horatio sees in you."

Even the mention of her husband's name did not alleviate Faith's need to end her horrible thirst. She pushed away her distrust of the liquid and took a small sip. When she tasted nothing except cool, clear water, she drank the rest in long, grateful swallows. She set the glass down and pushed back the coverlet to swing her legs out of the bed.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. You're bound to be a trifle wobbly yet."

Given the heaviness in her limbs, Faith had to admit that the unknown woman was right. It wouldn't do any good to try to leave until the effects of the drug entirely left her body. She squinted into the shadowy corner instead. "Who are you?"

"You haven't figured it out yet?" The woman laughed. "Tsk. I thought you a bit brighter than that."

Faith chewed on her lower lip, trying to put together all the clues with her drug-fogged mind. A woman known not only to both herself and Gareth, but also to Horatio Grimsby. One with whom she'd interacted enough to have angered in some way.

And then all came clear. "Lady Blakely?" Faith frowned. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. And I suppose I should be fair enough to acknowledge that none of this is actually your fault. But I'm just not that fair." She stood and stepped out of the shadows, her lovely face contorted with jealous hatred. "For a while there, it appeared I wasn't going to have to take such extreme action."

Faith closed her eyes and pressed her lips together, forcing herself to think, fighting the cobwebs and the dizziness from the laudanum. "You and Gareth once had an...an...understanding?"

"No!" Evelyn's voice became sharp. "We did not have an 'understanding,' as you so delicately put it. We had a relationship. One you wouldn't begin to comprehend, given your recently removed innocence."

Faith's eyes grew round.

"Oh, yes. Horatio told me about those sweetly soiled sheets, about how the Ice Princess did not even sleep with her own husband until the marriage

was already weeks old. He is of the impression that Gareth raped you, but you and I know that isn't true, don't we?"

Faith blushed hotly. "You mean you and he—?" She broke off, unable to speak so casually of the intimate act.

Evelyn laughed, an evil, grating sound that made Faith wince. "Still so prim. I've enjoyed many men in precisely that way. None quite so much as your husband, though. Which is why I intend to have him again."

Faith shook her head. "He doesn't want you now, Evelyn. And he *will* come for me."

"Oh, I don't think so. Right now, everything is pointing to the fact that you left with your lover. And that is precisely what you are going to do. Horatio is at his town house packing right now. We'll keep you here for a couple of days, after which you'll board a ship for America with him."

"America?"

"Of course. I considered the Continent first, but the world has become so much smaller, and I rather thought Gareth might manage to find you. America, however, is so large, so far away." The older woman smiled with smug self-satisfaction. "And once he learns you've left willingly, he won't be so inclined to go looking for you."

"Why on earth would Lord Jameson go to America? He'd be nothing there. Untitled, unable to work, since he never has." Faith shook her head, trying to clear it long enough to reason through the conversation.

"Because he is a fool who fancies himself in love with you. And because I've convinced him it is the only way you can be together." Evelyn tossed her head proudly. "I can be rather convincing when a man is... recently sated."

Faith's eyes grew wide when she caught Lady Blakely's meaning. She narrowed them and lifted her chin. "Gareth will find me before that." She looked down her nose with all the lofty disdain she could muster. "He loves me."

Evelyn's eyes flashed. "Ah, but he does not *trust* you. We've made sure of that. From there, it's only a small step to falling out of love." She sneered. "And then I'll be right there to pick up the pieces."

"You're mad." Faith blinked, fighting the residual effects of the laudanum. Sleepiness was overtaking her again, and she knew she couldn't

fight it much longer. “He’ll figure out it was Horatio, and if he doesn’t, my sister Grace will.”

“I have every intention of them figuring it out, but they’ll never link Horatio to me. And since you’ll both be here until it is time to sail, they won’t find either of you until it is far too late.”

Faith’s drug-fogged brain struggled to put bits and pieces of the conversation together. Something was odd. “Here?” It was the second time Evelyn had made reference to being in a different place than Horatio. Faith had assumed the town house to which he had brought her was his.

“You are in my home, Faith.” Evelyn stood. “You might as well go back to sleep. You’ll not be able to do anything until you’re less woozy. And I’ll only be drugging you again anyway. We can’t have you boarding that ship kicking and screaming, can we?”

“I won’t go willingly,” Faith murmured. “Never willingly.” Her eyes closed on a long blink, and she struggled to open them again. When she did, Evelyn was standing in front of her.

“You’ll go willingly, Lady Roth. Either comfortably, in a cabin with a nice bed, and explanations to the crew that you’re quite mad...or in a box.” Evelyn shrugged and turned to leave.

Faith rallied one last time. “He doesn’t want you, Evelyn. You’ll do all this for nothing. He doesn’t want you.”

The widow turned. Her hand flashed out, and she smacked Faith hard enough to knock her backward. Faith curled up, a hand pressed to the side of her face.

“You’re weak and unimaginative, my dear. Go to sleep. You don’t even know *how* to get what you want.” Then, without waiting for a response, Evelyn stalked from the room and slammed the door behind her.

Through the waves of sleepiness, Faith heard her bolt the door from the outside. She closed her eyes and succumbed once more to the laudanum.

Going somewhere, Jameson?”

Horatio whirled at the lazily drawled question, shielding the open trunk into which he was haphazardly tossing articles of clothing. “How did you get in here?” His voice quavered with fear.



“Your servants weren’t about.” Gareth straightened from the doorjamb against which he leaned nonchalantly. “You’ve already dismissed them in anticipation of your travels, perhaps?” He strolled over to glance into the trunk. “A shame. Looks as though you could use a valet with some packing skills.”

Horatio backed up and circled toward the door, giving Gareth a wide berth. “I could have you arrested for breaking in here!”

Gareth crossed his arms and stood still. “By all means. Summon the authorities, if you’ve anyone around to send. Perhaps they can tell us what you’ve done with my wife.”

At that, Horatio lunged for the door.

“You won’t get far, Jameson. I didn’t come alone.”

The earl stopped short, his eyes skipping between the doorway and Gareth.

“My brother and Huntwick were at my home when we discovered Faith was missing, so we thought we’d come pay a call on you, see if you had any”—he paused—“*advice* as to where we might find her.”

“I have no idea where your wife might be. Perhaps she left you.” Horatio raised his eyes but looked quickly away when he encountered Gareth’s inscrutable dark gaze.

“Oh, I think you *do* know. But just in case you decide to keep it a secret, Trevor and Jon have taken it upon themselves to search the premises.”

Horatio felt a burst of triumph. If the other two men were searching the house, where he knew they wouldn’t find Faith, he could possibly get past them all and outrun Roth. He took another step toward the door.

Gareth chuckled. “I thought you might try something foolish. So I picked up a couple more friends on the way.”

Horatio stopped.

“Blackthorne and his cousin Asheburton are also downstairs. Asheburton is Scottish, you know.” Gareth smiled disarmingly. “A rough bunch, those Scots. Always positively itching for a fight. It’s almost as though they think they’ve something to prove to us English chaps.”

Horatio sighed and turned, defeat written in his posture. “I don’t have your wife.”

“But you know where she is,” Gareth asserted.

Horatio hesitated, thought about the rank, stature, and general physical condition of the men assembled in his home, and visibly crumbled. He nodded.

Gareth's face turned hard, and he strode across the room. He grasped Horatio's shirt just under the collar and twisted, lifting the smaller man up off the floor and pressing him back against the wall. "If you've harmed a single hair on her head...!"

Horatio's voice was a squeak. "She's fine, my lord! I promise. I'll tell you everything."

"Put him down, Gareth." Jon stood in the doorway. "He's no good to us if you frighten him to death."

Gareth took a deep breath, then let go without warning. Horatio's feet barely found the floor in time to stop himself from landing on his rather soft backside. "You question him, then. It's all I can do to keep myself from killing him." He brushed past his brother and left the room.

Faith opened her eyes again, this time to complete darkness. The pounding in her head had subsided, and she sat up and stretched, flexing her feet to test out her ability to use her legs. Everything felt normal. She sat still for a moment, listening carefully, her eyes roving the dark room to try to ascertain whether or not she was still alone. She heard nothing.

Carefully, she pushed back the covers and slid from the bed, her bare feet encountering soft carpeting. She felt her way along the wall until she came to a window covered with heavy drapes. She pushed open the curtains, which allowed a bit of light from the city to filter into the room, revealing the location of the door.

Quickly, Faith crossed the room and quietly grasped the doorknob. It turned easily, but the door did not budge. In frustration, Faith remembered the sound of the door being bolted before she'd passed out. She frowned and glanced around to see if any other means of escape presented itself.

The clouds chose that moment to part and allow the moon to shine, casting eerie shadows into the room from the branches of a large tree just outside the window. Faith watched the shadows move, chewing on her lower lip while she thought about her predicament. She had to escape

before Horatio showed up and he and Lady Blakely could overpower her and force her to take more laudanum.

The wind blew, causing the tree's thin upper branches to scratch against the glass. Faith tilted her head and began walking slowly across the room. "The tree's upper branches," she murmured.

When she reached the window, she discovered how very close the tree was to the house. If she could get out there, she might be able to reach one of the sturdier limbs.

She lifted the sill, found that it opened easily, and stuck her head outside. Looking down, she found herself on the third floor of the town house, and unfortunately none of the branches she could reach looked strong enough to bear her weight. She'd have to jump and hope she caught one nearer the tree trunk. She swallowed hard, trying not to think about what would happen if she missed.

Quickly, before she lost her nerve, she gathered up her skirts, sat on the edge of the sill, and swung her legs outside. She ducked her head out as well and sat precariously perched with both hands braced on the walls inside the room.

When she looked down again, a wave of dizziness washed over her. She closed her eyes until it passed, then opened them and picked out a branch that looked strong. With a last deep breath, she carefully extended one arm outside the window and leaned forward as far as she could, holding on with one hand. With all her mustered strength, she braced her bare feet against the stone side of the building, pushed off as hard as possible, and launched herself into the air.

Her hands reached out and found the branch for which she'd aimed. One hand grasped it strongly; the other only grazed it with her fingertips. Faith felt a sudden sharp pain as her shoulder wrenched, and cried out despite herself, then dangled, her feet waving in the open air.

Quite by accident, she kicked out and found a sturdier branch upon which her toes found purchase. She reached up with her free hand to grasp the branch above and began cautiously inching her way toward the trunk of the tree. Once there, she wrapped her arms around it with a thankful little gasp before glancing back at the house—just in time to see Evelyn appear at the open window.

Their eyes met and widened. For a second, the two women just stared at one another, then both burst into activity. Evelyn disappeared from the window, while Faith began climbing downward, doing a better job of it than she might have imagined, given her lack of experience. Grace and Mercy had practically lived in the trees and on the backs of horses in their childhoods. Faith had stayed indoors, helping Patience and playing tea party. Still, she gained the ground in short order and began running for the rear of the garden.

Evelyn burst through the back door. "Faith! Stop! I'll shoot!"

Faith didn't even look back, just kept running, hoping to find a gate or something at the back through which she could escape. Instead, she found her worst nightmare. A hedge maze.

Her heart pounding from more than just exertion, she ran along its edge, looking for a way around instead of through. She heard Evelyn breathing hard, not far behind. For that reason, when she found the opening to the maze, she plunged inside despite her fears. She couldn't take the chance that the hedge would end flat against a garden wall, effectively trapping her for the madwoman. Inside the maze, she would have numerous opportunities to hide, as long as she was able to keep moving.

The moon was her ally in this instance, shining brightly down into the garden. Faith made her way along the path, focusing only on *why* she was running, rather than *where* she was running. It was a small maze, not nearly as complicated as the one from her childhood or the one in Amanda's garden, and before she knew it, she was through, emerging on the other side, where she saw, thankfully, the garden gate.

Praying she'd find it unlocked, she ran to it and fumbled with the catch until it sprung open with a sharp, metallic clang. Sobbing with relief, Faith hurtled through, then crashed headlong into a hard, male chest. She looked up into the Duke of Blackthorne's surprised face.

"She's got a gun," she panted, then coughed with her effort to breathe.

Quickly, the duke pushed Faith behind him and stepped close to the marble wall, pressing them both back and against it. A moment later, Evelyn ran through the opening.

In a flash, Sebastian reached out and grabbed Lady Blakely with one hand, knocking the pistol from her grasp with his other. While he controlled the struggling madwoman, Faith turned to look for Gareth, but saw only

Lachlan Kimball and her brother-in-law coming into the alley from the street. Processing this, her heart sank. Grace had figured it out and sent them. Not Gareth. Her husband hadn't come for her after all.

Or had he?

"Faith."

She turned slowly at the sound of his beloved voice, saw him standing just outside the garden gate. He'd gone inside to find her and come out through the garden. Her gray eyes filled with tears.

"Gareth," she replied, and choked up before she could say more.

He held out a hand, and she took one small step toward him before running the last few feet and throwing herself into his arms. Burying her face into his shoulder, she sobbed. "I knew you'd come for me!"

He stroked her hair, his face stark with relief at Faith's rescue...and at the fact that she had willingly sought his embrace. Stepping back, he held her at arm's length and quirked a crooked grin. "Why, Lady Roth. I believe you look a trifle mussed. I don't know that I've ever seen you in such a state."

Faith looked down at her smudged and torn gown. She tried to press into place a hanging bit of lace on her bodice, but it just drooped back down as soon as she let go. She gave up and bit her lip.

"I climbed a tree," she explained with a wan smile, her voice a little wobbly. "And I w-went through the maze."

"I'm proud of you." He looked down and said haltingly, "I'm so sorry I didn't trust in you." He stopped and met her shimmering gray eyes, his own awash with regret and self-recrimination. "Looks as though you didn't really need me to rescue you."

Faith shook her head and laid a hand on his cheek. "But I *do* need you, my love. Every single day of my life." She smiled softly. "This time, *I'll* ask. Can we begin again?"

And Gareth pulled her close again, kissed her forehead, and whispered gruffly, "Let's go home, princess."

## *Thirty-seven*

The men all sat on the terrace at Rothmere, watching the action taking place in the garden below. “Do you think he can pull it off?” Gareth’s question broke the tense silence.

“Of course he can,” scoffed Jon, but he sat forward a bit nervously in his chair.

Trevor grinned around his cheroot. “Care to place a wager on that, Roth?”

“Really, Hunt,” drawled Sebastian. The duke crossed his legs, a look of bored disdain on his handsome face. “You might try getting through at least one conversation without making reference to that rather unfortunate incident.”

The Earl of Huntwick’s smile broadened. “Would you rather discuss your eventual marriage to my youngest sister-in-law?”

As he spoke, something new distracted their attention from the display on the lawn: a quiet gasp and the sound of rustling bushes floated upward from beneath the terrace upon which they all sat. A moment later, the top of Mercy’s auburn head appeared.

“Push me up higher, Charity,” she hissed.

Charity grunted and stood as tall as she was able, stifling a groan as one of Mercy’s feet dug painfully into her shoulder. It briefly crossed her mind that at nearly seventeen years of age, she should certainly know better than to have become involved in her younger sister’s escapades, but Mercy had managed to talk her into it. “What in the world have you been eating? You’re heavier than you look,” she muttered.

The extra boost was enough for Mercy’s dark pansy-colored eyes to clear the edge of the terrace. She scanned the pairs of nearly identical boots, then looked up to find the men who wore them looking right at her. The Duke of Blackthorne’s golden eyes narrowed to slits.

With a startled squeak, Mercy tried to duck back below the edge. The sudden unexpected movement threw Charity off-balance, and she stumbled

back, regained her balance, then lost it again as Mercy's arms began flailing in an effort to keep from falling. The skirts she'd been holding up with one of her hands fell over her sister's face, and Charity took a dozen or so awkward weaving steps before she finally fell, tumbling both her and Mercy unceremoniously to the ground.

The men on the terrace laughed. Mercy, as irrepressible as ever, laughed along with them, popped upright, and executed a jaunty little bow. Charity, who did *not* enjoy looking foolish, scowled. She chanced a look toward the terrace and locked eyes with the Marquess of Asheburton, who slowly shook his head as if rebuking her for such childish behavior. Charity lifted her chin and glared back.

Fortunately, Lachlan's attention was diverted by a shout from Gareth. "By God, will you look at that? He's doing it!"

The group stood as one and lined up at the marble balustrade, a privileged and powerful row of men, indeed, all awed and humbled by the event they were witnessing below.

Cautiously, Amanda let go of little Geoffrey's hands and pressed her own hands to her cheeks as she watched her son, eyes glowing with pride as he took his first steps. His little face was aglow with a happy smile, and he toddled five full feet before falling into his Aunt Faith's outstretched hands.

She swept him up and hugged him, then lifted his little hand. "Wave to Papa, Geoffrey," she said. "Do you see him? Up on the terrace next to Uncle Gareth?"

Geoffrey laughed and waved his chubby little hand and wriggled to get down. Faith settled him on his blanket and looked back up to give her husband a radiant smile.

Gareth smiled back at her and sat down, his expression turning thoughtful. Faith, he thought, looked especially lovely with a child in her arms. Still smiling, he turned and clapped Jon on the back, adding his congratulations to those of the others. But a certain thought kept running through his mind.

For the remainder of the day, Faith felt her husband's eyes on her. Really, she could concentrate on almost nothing else. She looked at him from the lawn, smiling quizzically as if to ask what he wanted. He shook his head slightly, his lips curving in a lazy grin. He reached up and kissed two of his fingers, then held up his hand and wiggled them at her. Her smile

softened. A kiss. He was sending her a kiss. She turned back to talk with Amanda and Grace, but soon her eyes strayed back to the terrace.

Gone. He was gone. Her eyes flicked to the steps at each end of the terrace, but she didn't see Gareth anywhere. He must have gone inside for some reason, she decided.

"Excuse me, please," she murmured to her sisters and Amanda. Standing, she hurried across the lawn and up the steps, nodding at the men who stood when she appeared. She gifted them with a brief, distracted smile, opened one of the doors, and slipped inside the library.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust after being so long out in the glorious sunshine. Before they did, she felt strong hands settle on her shoulders.

"My lady."

She laughed a little and turned to face Gareth, gasping a bit when he pulled her close and caught her lips with his. She melted against him, tilting her face upward. When she felt his tongue dance lightly across the crease between her upper and lower lips, she sighed happily, opening her mouth to let him deepen the kiss.

Gareth inhaled, taking in Faith's intoxicating scent, that beguiling combination of sunshine and fresh flowers he had always loved, and felt himself harden with arousal. Reluctantly, he ended their kiss, but held his wife's face in his hands, his forehead pressed lightly against hers.

When she could think again, Faith realized they were still standing near the doors. She whispered, "Gareth, anyone could come in here."

He smiled teasingly. "And find me kissing my wife in my own home? My goodness...the scandal!"

She giggled. "They're our guests, love."

He scowled in sham annoyance and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Go fulfill your duties, princess. I'll see you at dinner."

Impulsively, Faith threw her arms around his neck and pressed a last kiss to his ear. "I love you," she whispered, then turned to go back outside.

Before she stepped out of reach, Gareth swatted her playfully on her backside. She jumped in startled reaction, laughed out loud, tossed him a last sweet smile, and left.

Dinner with all the Ackerlys present and accounted for was a loud, boisterous affair. Conversations swirled around the table. Charity scowled



at Lachlan Kimball, who ignored her to converse quietly with her twin, Amity. Mercy flirted outrageously with Sebastian, who, given her persistence, could not have ignored the girl if his life had depended upon it. Patience took turns quietly and fondly admonishing both girls. Grace and Amanda chatted with their husbands and with their father, but Faith heard none of it, nor did she taste a single morsel of the impeccably prepared roast duck she ate primly and correctly, seated at the foot of the table. The only thing of which she was aware was her husband's dark gaze, smoldering at her from his seat directly opposite hers.

She felt flushed and warm and slightly tingly. When a footman appeared at her elbow to offer more wine, Faith shook her head and smiled, then reached for her water, hoping the cool liquid would help moderate her overly warm state. Gareth cocked his head knowingly and raised a single eyebrow, which only made Faith blush more deeply.

Fortunately, her husband was distracted when Bingham Ackerly addressed him directly. "Have you heard anything from the authorities, my lord, about how and when Lord Jameson and Lady Blakely will be punished?"

Reluctantly, he pulled his gaze from his wife's becomingly pink face to address his father-in-law. "I did not call the authorities." With the exception of the younger men at the table, everyone stopped eating and turned to stare at Gareth. He sliced a piece of roast duck and calmly stabbed it with his fork.

When he didn't seem inclined to elaborate, Charity sighed with exasperation. "Why not?"

"There didn't seem to be much point, since they were both departing the country within the week." He took another bite, and stopped chewing when everyone continued to stare at him. "For America," he added, by way of explanation.

"Why in the world would they go to America?" Grace poked her husband, who was smirking in the most provoking fashion, in the shoulder. "You know something, don't you?"

Trevor's smirk widened into a grin. "I think Jameson decided there would be room to breathe in a country so vast," he provided helpfully. "And Lady Blakely wholeheartedly agreed."

“Especially,” drawled Gareth, “when I showed them it would be impossible for him to continue to do so here.”

Charity laughed with impressed delight. “Welcome to the family, big brother,” she said, then scowled and looked down at her plate when the Marquess of Asheburton raised his brow and gave her a quelling look.

Finally dinner was over, cigars and brandy were enjoyed, and their guests found their separate ways to their chambers. Most everyone was weary with the day spent outdoors, the lively company, and the wonderful meal. Faith blew out the last candle and slid into bed, settling into the arms of her husband, which closed softly and securely around her. She sighed with happiness. It had been a truly lovely day, with their family and closest friends in attendance for the small country party to show off the renovated estate.

“Lord Asheburton seemed quite taken with Amity,” she remarked. She’d seen them conversing quietly several times during the day.

Gareth nodded and stroked her hair. “She’s young yet, but I have a feeling Ashe is going to be looking for a wife in the next couple of years.”

Faith giggled. “Wouldn’t it provoke Charity if he became her brother-in-law? She really cannot abide him.”

Gareth smiled into the darkness. “That one will be difficult to match when she has her Season. I don’t know that I’ve ever met someone with a temper quite like hers.”

“Perhaps she’ll learn to control it by then.”

Privately, Gareth doubted it, but he wisely held his tongue. Faith was fiercely protective of her sisters—a trait the entire family shared, and one he particularly admired. But tonight, he wanted Faith in a far different mood. “Do you know my favorite thing that happened today?”

His voice had dropped, had that husky, intimate quality she loved, and Faith shivered deliciously. She recalled their stolen kiss in the library and thought she might know, but she shook her head anyway. “Tell me, please?”

“The way you looked with little Geoffrey in your arms, darling. So happy.” He stroked her silky hair. “So beautiful.”

Faith caught her breath at the unexpected answer and tilted her head back on his chest to look at his face. She reached up with one finger and ran it across his stubbly chin. “We’ve never really talked about children.” Her mind skipped briefly to the one time they’d mentioned the subject, then

skittered away, loath to ruin the moment with thoughts of the troubles they'd had on their road to falling in love.

"I rather thought they'd come along whenever they were meant to. Today, however..." He caught the tip of her finger between his teeth and then released it. "After seeing you with Geoffrey, I find I'd like to talk about it. And I'd like to talk about a few other things as well, princess. Things we need to address and resolve and get behind us."

Faith's gray eyes turned sober, and she nodded. "Go on."

Gareth reached up, engulfed her hand with one of his, and brought them both to his chest. "Do you trust me?"

Her heart wrenched at the vulnerability in his simple question. "With my life," she said softly.

"I should have trusted you. You'd never given me any reason not to. It was just my own foolish pride, and the notion that I could somehow make you love me despite everything that happened to rush my courtship."

Faith rubbed her cheek on his shoulder, loving the hardness of his sinewy muscle against her soft skin. "I made you feel as though you had to win me over when I painted you with a brush colored by rumor, my love."

He laughed softly. "Stop. You're usurping my apology."

Her eyes glowed silver. "We do seem to have a great deal of difficulty apologizing to one another, don't we?"

"Then shall we call it even? Clean slate?"

Faith nodded happily. "You mentioned children, love?"

Gareth rolled her suddenly onto her back and took her lips in along, soft, poignant kiss that she returned, her heart fluttering. "Today, I positively ached to see you carrying our child," he murmured against her mouth. He lifted his head and propped it on a hand, smiling down at her in the semidarkness.

"I'd like that too, Gareth," she said quietly, and lifted her lips for more kisses. This time he cradled her face in his hands and took his time, savoring the way she responded, the way her mouth opened softly at his gentle coaxing. For a while they just tasted and tempted one another, whispering words that almost weren't words, sounds that made no sense but said everything in the world.

After a time, he rolled onto his back, cupping her buttocks and nestling her securely against him. Faith rubbed her nose on the side of his chest and

pressed a kiss there. "Gareth?" Her voice was small, hesitant.

"Mm?"

"When we are like this..." she began, then stopped and chewed on her lower lip.

Gareth held his breath. This sort of intimate conversation was still new to his prim wife, and though it was becoming easier to her, he could still sense her internal struggle to be open and frank. She'd come a long way in the few weeks since they'd begun their marriage anew.

He smiled into the darkness. "Go on, princess."

Idly, she began tracing a tapered finger through the hair on his chest. He reached deep inside himself and somehow found the strength to remain still, though her innocent caresses were driving him wild with need.

"Well...sometimes, would it be all right for *me* to touch *you* first, or even to kiss you first?"

He almost groaned, desire building as she continued to draw circles on his chest, making them smaller and smaller until she encountered his puckering nipple. "I am your husband, Faith. I do not want a marriage that is one-sided. You may *always* feel free to touch me as you wish, and to speak your mind." He caught that maddening finger in his hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me with just this one little finger?"

"Yes." Faith caught her breath and stifled a moan when he opened his mouth and closed his lips around her fingertip. "I know because every single time you touch me in that same place, in just that way, I feel as though I'll come apart."

She tried to pull her hand away. When he wouldn't relinquish it, she wriggled until she was lying half atop him, her long, slender legs entangled with his. She bent and placed her mouth where her finger had been and was rewarded when she felt his nipple harden beneath her lips. Fascinated, she opened her mouth and exhaled, her humid breath surrounding and bathing the hard nubbin in sensuous warmth. He sucked her finger further into his mouth, cradling and stroking it with his tongue. She gasped and looked up swiftly, the ends of her hair tickling his chest and abdomen.

"Oh, God, princess," he whispered, his voice rough with wanting.

Her hand freed, she slid it lightly down his chest and stomach, his skin tingling everywhere she touched, until her fingers closed softly around his

rigid arousal. His hands found her trim waist. He lifted and settled her firmly astride him. She wriggled and braced both hands on his chest, her legs gripping the sides of his hips, unsure of what she should do until he arched his back and tilted his hips upward, pressing his hardness against her moist center. She rolled her hips and moaned, her eyes closing with pleasure.

“Yes, love.” He fought the need to surge up into her, to thrust himself deep inside her heated core. “Take all the time you want. I am at *your* mercy.”

Faith dug her toes into the sheets and lifted herself a fraction. The thick passion in his voice did not escape her, and she thrilled at her own power, astonished to learn that he was as affected by her touch as she was by his. She leaned forward to kiss him. “I don’t want to wait, darling.” She pushed back until she felt the tip of his manhood enter her slightly. “Together,” she breathed, and his control abruptly shattered.

With a groan, he tilted his hips and filled her in one stroke. She cried out and buried her face in his neck, pushing back to meet him, then flexing her back and lifting away. He buried his hands in her golden hair, thrusting harder now, and she moved with him, finding the rhythm that drew them ever closer to that edge.

She gasped his name, and he rolled with her, still joined, pressing her into the bed. Her hands roved over his back and shoulders, gripping and releasing in reaction to the streaks of sensation coming faster and faster now, until they overlapped and she exploded in cascading waves of ecstasy.

When he felt her body grip him, when he heard the keening cry that signaled her fulfillment, Gareth joined her, thrusting into her one last time, erupting with his own blinding flash of oblivion, spilling his offering at the entrance to her womb. He collapsed atop her, shifting his weight slightly so that most of it was braced on his forearms, folded her against him, and rolled slightly to his side, taking her with him, still connected.

She stirred, and he tightened his arms around her. “Shhh,” he crooned. “Be still. Feel it happening.”

She settled immediately and nestled softly against him. “Feel what, darling?”

His hands stroked her tousled hair. “Our baby.” He smiled. “Just imagine if we’ve created a life just now. Together.”

Faith smiled too and closed her eyes. “Together,” she agreed.

# Epilogue

*Spring, 1818*

**I**s he sleeping yet, Mama?”

Imogen’s high-pitched voice carried up the terrace steps, and little Jonathon’s half-closed eyelids popped open at the disturbance. Faith smiled ruefully, reached into the child’s bed and placed a soft hand on his warm little tummy.

“Almost, angel,” she told her daughter in a soothing voice.

Imogen Marie Lloyd appeared at the top of the steps, a tiny, three-year-old replica of her mother. She tiptoed across the terrace, making more noise in her efforts to be quiet than she would have if she’d simply walked. Leaning over the rim of the bassinet, she admonished her baby brother. “Now, Jonathon. It is Mama’s birthday, and I can’t give her a present until you take your nap.” A lock of long golden hair slipped from her shoulder to dangle into the bassinet and tickle Jon’s little face. He giggled and waved his tiny fists at her.

Faith laughed softly at the impatient look on her daughter’s face. “Why don’t we take him with us instead?”

Imogen clapped her hands and danced along the terrace while Faith gathered Jonathon and a blanket up into her arms. When she had the babe securely settled on her hip, she extended a hand and allowed the little girl to lead her down the terrace steps and into the garden.

“Your present is in the maze, Mama.” The three-year-old pulled impatiently on Faith’s hand to make her go faster.

The maze.

Faith smiled. Not long after she’d discovered she was with child, she’d asked Gareth if they could add a hedge maze to their rather extensive gardens. “I don’t want to be afraid anymore,” she’d explained sweetly, her

face earnest. "And I want our children to be able to play and enjoy all the pleasures of childhood without being affected by my fears."

Gareth had opened his mouth to speak, hesitated, and then plunged ahead. "Why are you so afraid of hedge mazes, princess?" He watched her face cloud and momentarily wished he hadn't asked.

"It's silly," she'd said slowly, then haltingly told him about the incident from her childhood with Duncan and the chambermaid and the giant spider that had never really existed. When she finished, she gave him a sheepish smile. "See? I should have gotten over that long before I became an adult."

Touched by her bravery, both in facing her fears and in telling him about them, Gareth had agreed and designed the maze himself, making it large and elaborate and intricate. It was truly beautiful to behold from the soaring windows of the upper stories of the mansion, and when it was complete, Gareth had led her through it. When they'd reached the first point at which one had to choose which way to turn, he'd stopped, placing his hand on the head of a marble statue of an angel set into the corner. Faith looked at him curiously.

He'd smiled. "If you can't find your way, princess, just follow the angels." He pointed in the direction the angel was looking, which was the way they had just come. "I had them mounted so that they always face the exit path. No one will know this but you. The angels are for you alone. Just as you, my angel, were made for me alone." He leaned down to whisper, "And I've hired an extra gardener *just* for spider patrol."

She'd laughed softly, her heart filled with warmth, and lifted eyes shining with love to his. They strolled on hand in hand to the center of the maze.

Imogen's insistent tugging brought Faith out of her pleasant sojourn into the past. "Come on, Mama! Your present is in the middle!"

Laughing, Faith hitched Jonathon higher on her hip and obediently picked up the pace. Six turns and three angels later, they emerged into the cleared space at the center of the maze.

"Happy birthday, Mama!" Imogen clapped her little hands at the look of surprised delight on her mother's face.

There, planted in the very middle of the clearing, was the tree bouquet Gareth had given her the first time he'd come to call, complete with the



ribbons woven through the branches and flowers tucked into the leaves in a bright pattern. She walked in a circle around it, smiling happily.

“Imogen, you cunning little thing! However did you manage to keep this a secret with Papa away in London for so long?”

“She didn’t know until this morning.”

Faith leaned around the far side of the tree at the sound of her husband’s beloved voice, her eyes shining as he strolled into the clearing carrying a picnic basket. “I didn’t expect you home for another week,” she said softly.

“Did you honestly believe I’d miss your birthday?” he admonished, but his eyes were smiling. “Happy birthday, princess.” He leaned down to give her a soft kiss, set the basket on the grass, and took Jonathon from her arms. He lifted the child up over his head and said, “And you, unless I miss my guess, should be asleep, young man.”

The baby gurgled agreeably, and Faith, Gareth, and Imogen all laughed.

Imogen opened the picnic basket and pulled out a blanket. “Will you help me, please, Mama? I’m hungry,” she announced.

Grateful for the ability to share the beautiful spring day with the people she loved most in all the world, Faith did just that. Once she had the little girl settled with a plate of her favorite food, she looked up to find her husband watching her, his brown eyes soft with all the love in the world. The look they shared said it all: somehow, despite all the obstacles, they’d ended up here, building the family she’d always wanted.

“I love you,” he mouthed silently.

And, feeling cherished, trusted, and adored, she smiled.

## Reviewers Are Charmed by Deneane Clark and *Grace*

“Nicely written and with a bunch of lively characters, debut author Clark’s tale engages the reader in a merry chase between a charming English lord and a spirited young woman in the game of matrimony.”

—*RT Book Reviews*

“*Grace* is a sparkling debut by a talented new author. The characters are eminently likeable, the plot rapidly paced, the dialogue catchy, and the action sometimes moving and always captivating...If you like romance with lots of sexual tension, a pursued hero becoming the pursuer, and deep emotions masquerading as antagonism in a heroine, you’ll love Trevor and Grace...and *Grace*.”

—Romance Reviews Today

“The cast, especially the lead couple, make for a fine Regency romance as Trevor chases after Grace, who seems immune to his charm.”

—The Best Reviews

“*Grace* begins with a bang and the pace never lets up. It is an easy read, with smooth-flowing action and believable characters.”

—Roundtable Reviews

# Other *Leisure* Books by Deneane Clark:

*GRACE*

**Copyright**

A LEISURE BOOK®

January 2010

Published by  
Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.  
200 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Copyright © 2010 by Deneane Clark

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this eBook on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of publisher.

E-ISBN: 978-1-4285-0797-5

The name “Leisure Books” and the stylized “L” with design are trademarks of Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Visit us online at [www.dorchesterpub.com](http://www.dorchesterpub.com).